

OF FISH AND SWIMMING SWORDS

A Thesis

by

JAMES SMITH

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2008

Major Subject: English

OF FISH AND SWIMMING SWORDS

A Thesis

by

JAMES SMITH

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved by:

Co-Chairs of Committee,	Charles Taylor
	M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Committee Member,	James Rosenheim
Head of Department,	M. Jimmie Killingsworth

December 2008

Major Subject: English

ABSTRACT

Of Fish and Swimming Swords. (December 2008)

James Smith, B.S., Texas A&M University

Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee: Dr. Charles Taylor
Dr. M. Jimmie Killingsworth

This original novel with a critical introduction is a summary and capstone of my study of creative writing at Texas A&M University. The introduction uses storytelling traditions in genre science fiction as well as non-genre writing as it explores the novel's narrative structure, the world building process, and character development. The novel demonstrates the postmodern and genre techniques while masquerading as a traditional short novel, encouraging the reader to discover possible conspiracies in order to complete the narrative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Stephen Balfour, Dr. Guido Kanschat, Philip Kizer, and many other “lay readers” who took time to offer helpful criticism and insight into the novel. Thanks also to the Queer Studies Working Group and the Creative Writing and Rhetoric Working Group, both sponsored by the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research. Some of the materials that I drew on for the introduction were made available by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection at the Cushing Memorial Library.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		Page
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	A. Narrative Structure	3
	B. World Building	7
	C. Characterization	13
II	BARBARA INVESTIGATES	17
III	CHARLES GOES TO A MEETING	29
IV	BARBARA GETS HER MEMES	39
V	CHARLES ATTENDS HIS MEETING	49
VI	BARBARA BATHES	61
VII	CHARLES'S SURPRISE	71
VIII	BARBARA'S DISCOVERED	83
IX	CHARLES LEARNS BARBARA'S DEAD	95
X	ADAM AND EVE	107
XI	CHARLES INVESTIGATES	118
XII	ADAM GOES HOME	130
XIII	DORA IN THE OFFICE	141
XIV	ADAM DIVES INTO THE VR	151
XV	DORA DISCOVERS BARBARA	162
XVI	ADAM AND THE TREE	173

CHAPTER	Page
XVII BARBARA THINKS	185
XVIII CHARLES LOOKS FOR ADAM	196
XIX THE HOUSE FALLS	207
XX SUMMARY	219
WORKS CITED	220
VITA	223

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Of Fish and Swimming Swords is a novel that both summarizes and caps my study of creative writing at Texas A&M University. While the novel is by its nature a very organic construction guided in large part by its characters, I will discuss in this introduction the literary and cultural influences that guided its formal construction.

My primary goal in this novel is to answer affirmatively Ursula Le Guin's question in her essay, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," in which she discusses the nature of the science fiction novel and Virginia Woolf's concept of the novel as a study in character: "Can Mrs. Brown and science fiction ever sit down together in the same railway carriage, or spaceship? Or to put it plainly, Can a science fiction writer write a novel?" (99). My response is a continuation of the science fiction tradition of social commentary, begun with novels such as Zamyatin's *We*, using a mix of traditional and experimental story telling techniques to capture the soul of a society by examining a character's response to that society.

In addition to creating a science fiction novel that is centered on characterization, I try to lift the "science" of science fiction out of the text and into what I call a "scientific reading" by pushing the reader's suspension of disbelief into an active creation of conspiracy theories to flesh out the incomplete narrative that the text purports to create. The text acts as data against which the reader's theories can be tested.

This thesis follows the format of the *MLA Handbook*, Sixth Edition.

Science fiction is sometimes described as the mythology of the industrial age (Broderrick 8). As with traditional mythologies, it can have its own vocabulary and reader expectations. We build entire institutions around the interpretation and application of our myths, from the classical myths of the Greeks and Romans to the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu, and other contemporary mythologies. The story of Adam and Eve takes on entire complexities of new meaning in the hands of Paul and later Christian writers who provide a context and discursive structure that is new and outside the traditional Jewish experience of their time.

While much of science fiction can be read in the same way as contemporary, non-genre fiction, it also creates new worlds, neologisms, and other textual and semantic artifacts that require a suspension not only of disbelief, but of parsing and integration into a world view in the mind of the reader. It is important to distinguish between the text as an artifact consisting of a linear sequence of glyphs forming words forming sentences, etc., and the narrative that arises in the reader's mind as they read that text. In his essay, "About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words," Samuel R. Delany illustrates this by walking through the phrase "The red sun is high, the blue low" (37–40), showing that the reader must continually modify his mental image as he reads, questioning assumptions that he otherwise might not be consciously aware of.

This fluid interpretation is one of the defining characteristics of science fiction in modern literature and is what makes some aspects of postmodernism natural for the science fiction reader. Developments in the late 20th century in the crossover between genre science fiction and non-genre literature have resulted in the emergence of the slipstream genre: "books [that] tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday life' " (Sterling 78). That is, iconoclastic works that are the "graphic equivalent [of M. C. Escher]" (78). Many

works which might be considered slipstream (e.g., Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, or Robert Coover's collection, *Pricksongs & Descants*) are not considered part of the science fiction corpus even though they might borrow some of the genre's techniques.

I have tried to push further this tearing at the fabric of comfortable, known society, developing an open, estranged narrative that invites the reader to construct a series of hypothetical narratives to complete what I provide, testing them against the clues that are included in the text to find the best completed narrative, similar to how a person would approach adjusting their reactions to a foreign society—a kind of culture shock. This results in the scientific reading because it mirrors the scientific cycle of thesis proposition and testing.

A. Narrative Structure

I wrote the novel with three main constraints in mind. First, I wanted a traditional plot with characters and relationships that would not be difficult to read and so take the focus off of the characters. Second, I wanted to explore an artificially constructed world that could provide its own meta-narrative even if I didn't focus on it in the text. By giving hints of it throughout the text, I hoped to fulfill my third guideline of enticing the reader into engaging with the text and producing a "scientific" reading through constructing narrative theories (or conspiracy theories) about what was going on "between the lines" of the narrative. This last element is crucial to my novel, similar to how the reader must interact with Coover's "The Magic Poker" in *Pricksongs & Descants* or animé such as Takashi Watanabe's *Boogiepop Phantom*. In both examples though, a single, best reading can be found. I am trying not to provide any such singular completion, instead leaving the field open to a variety of interpretations in a manner similar to a religious text.

I want the reader to perceive a simple story at first glance, but as they start finding parallels between sections, I want them to start seeing a more complex framework that is working behind the scenes. Finally, as they are running through the narrative, I want them to get glimpses of a shadowy mechanism that is behind everything, yet does not itself appear in the text. As Delany explains well in an illustration from “Empire Star:”

“See the holes?” [Charona] asked.

In the plating that floored the bridge, here and there were pinpricks of light.

“They just look like random dots, do they not?”

[Comet] nodded.

“That’s the simplex view. Now start walking and keep looking.”

Comet started to walk, steadily, staring upward. The dots of light winked out, and here and there others appeared, then winked out again, and more, or perhaps the original ones, returned.

“There’s a superstructure of girders above the bridge that gets in the way of some of the holes and keeps thee from perceiving all at once. But thou art now receiving the complex view, for thou art aware that there is more than what is seen from any one spot. Now, start to run, and keep thy head up.”

Jo began to run along the rocks. The rate of flickering increased, and suddenly he realized that the holes were in a pattern, six-pointed stars crossed by diagonals of seven holes each. It was only with the flickering coming so fast that the entire pattern could be perceived—

He stumbled, and skidded onto his hands and knees.

“Didst thou see the pattern?”

“Eh . . . yeah.” Jo shook his head. His palms stung through the gloves, and one knee was raw.

“That was the multiplex view.” (109)

The novel is in three acts. In the first act (Chapters II–VII), the action is rising and the characters are introduced to a problem which they need to solve. In the second act (Chapters VIII–XIII), the characters are aware of the problem and are searching for a solution. In the final act (Chapters XIV–XIX), the characters know what the solution is and are in the process of resolving the problem. I used this fairly traditional construction to lure the reader into feeling that they are in familiar territory. I want them to think they know what is happening, even as I try to subvert those expectations.

The narrative style established at the beginning of a novel establishes an unspoken contract between the author and the reader. In my novel, I begin using the conventions of a mystery novel: the main character is investigating a dead person in a closed room. The novel claims to offer the clues necessary for the reader to connect the necessary dots so that they can understand who was responsible and how they did it, if only in hindsight the reader had noticed the right things as they read (Lutz 173).

The reader of a mystery novel can expect a series of clues that lead them to the final solution, but the problem the reader of my novel is trying to solve isn't the problem that the characters are trying to resolve. Even so, I don't disappoint, but the clues are hidden within the text and not the narrative. Only by regarding the text as an artifact in the narrative can the reader find the clues that are necessary to solve the riddle of what happened to Luke in the opening scene (page 17): the letters of the names. The Luke of Chapter II is the Laura of Chapter V and finally the Lawrence of Chapter XIX.

The disconnect between the goal of the characters and the goal of the reader occurs first in Chapter V, when Charles views the crime scene as part of a meeting with a shadowy council. At that point, we know that the crime scene is secondary and serves the purposes of the council as well as the author as a participant in constructing the narrative. It is by showing the same scene a second time, but with the names changed, that I reveal the pattern of how names work. The second set of duplicate scenes (from Chapters VII and X) reinforces the pattern: characters whose names begin with the same letter are the same character. This is the text working as an artifact in helping the reader understand the resolution of the murder by the end of the novel.

Unlike a typical murder mystery or science fiction novel, the primary narrative is about the characters, and it is for this reason that the solution of the mystery or information about

the strange world are all secondary to the characters. My primary purpose of the narrative is to paint a picture of the characters as they try to make their way through their world, solving whatever problems I throw at them as the author. This allows me to subvert the murder mystery narrative in Chapter V and require an examination of the text as artifact.

This leads directly to an example of a scientific reading of the narrative. We could hypothesize that the “bad” computer has taken over a group of people which includes Luke/Laura/Lawrance and that these people appear to be dead (or at least presented as such) in the virtual reality system. We could also hypothesize that people with implants are particularly susceptible to this commandeering of their minds.

The best support for this theory is in Chapter XVII (page 188) when Barbara is considering what might be making the virtual reality system behave the way it is and stumbles upon the idea that the virtual reality system might be using some of the processing power from the people it has taken over. Many of Barbara’s expectations of how a virtual reality system should behave are based on an electronic pre-print by Brian Whitworth in which he discusses the aspects of our own world that are most easily explained by considering it to be a simulation.

Further supporting this theory is the disorientation of Lawrence when the computer’s control is broken in Chapter XIX, if indeed Lawrence is Laura is Luke. With the initial mystery solved, the reader can then tackle some of the other threads that are introduced in the novel. For example, what is the triangle for? How does it relate to the four Muses? What is the set of three things that the trinitarians believe in, and how are they connected to the triangle that Barbara saw?

B. World Building

As pointed out in the preceding example hypothesis, the world setting of the novel is much larger than what is depicted in the text. The novel is squarely within the slipstream tradition, as young as it might be, and as such, tends to “quote” worlds instead of “create” them (Sterling 80). That is, the world in which the novel is set isn’t so much a world which I created but one which I actively discovered while preparing for and writing the novel. The world is as much a result of authorial discovery as the characters are, reflecting the needs of the characters as much as the characters reflect it in their reaction to the society in which they find themselves.

One of the consequences of developing a “discovered” world instead of an “invented” world is that the setting must be as self-consistent as possible. This is both a boon and a curse to the creative writer. Unlike a historical work where the setting can be checked constantly against historical sources, or a scientific work that must be consistent with the experimental evidence, a creative fiction work must construct its own framework for managing its consistency. It must construct its own truth, especially if the author is expecting the reader to construct theories and measure them against the authorial evidence.

The full context that was discovered over the course of the novel writing—the self-consistent truth surrounding the novel—helps provide answers to some of the questions that come up when exploring a hypothesis, especially concerning the Muses and the trinitarians. To understand that context though, we need to look at the journey the novel setting took from initial conception to the full text.

The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic American future. Unlike novels such as Walter Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, this is not an America after a nuclear holocaust but

one after a significant social upheaval. Just as the attacks of 9/11 form a bright line dividing American society between a time of great civil liberty and one of increasing government intrusion in the name of security, the untold social upheaval preceding the events in the novel mark a line between what we recognize as our society and that of the novel.

The novel is about memes, propaganda, and to some degree, religion, though these are often inseparable. Science fiction lends itself to religion building (Disch 141), so not only is science fiction a natural fit for exploring a four-member family as if it were ordinary, but it is also the right genre for exploring an artificially constructed social religion such as the Cardinalities and the Muses.

The Cardinalities and the Muses are propaganda by the State, but are also a religion that uses every avenue available to influence the population. Barbara uses memes instead of traditional medicine to treat depression (page 47) because the memes can be controlled by the Muses and used to guide people such as Barbara into activities that the Muses need them to fill. Barbara's reliance on the memes is a recurring minor theme throughout the novel and an example of how intertwined the Muses are with society. Adam discusses the literature of the Muses as propaganda for much of Chapter XII (pages 134–137).

In creating the world of the novel, I began with the number four. There are four directions (north, south, east, west), four colors in standard commercial printing (cyan, yellow, magenta, black), four elements (water, air, earth, fire). Four elements of Indo-European civilization (warrior, priest, worker, other). Four gospels in the orthodox Christian tradition.

I created four times of day (morning, noon, evening, night) and four senses (sight, sound, tactile, and flavor as a combination of taste and smell). I called the four groups

of items Cardinalities after the “cardinal directions” and conjured four Muses to manage them.

I constructed four signs that represented these four Cardinalities: the sword and the cross to be opposites, and the rocket and fish to be orthogonal. I grouped all of the fours together, as summarized in Table I and described in limited form in the novel in Chapter IV (page 43).

Table I. Cardinalities and their aspects

	Sword	Fish	Cross	Rocket
color	magenta	cyan	black	yellow
element	fire	water	earth	air
sense	sight	flavor	tactile	sound
role	security	empathy	routing	transmission
direction	south	west	north	east
time	noon	evening	night	morning
time	9am–3pm	3pm–9pm	9pm–3am	3am–9am

Then, I took a vacation in Japan, visiting Tokyo, Hakone, Himeji Castle, Nara, Kyoto, and Niko. While there, my traveling companions and I remarked about the triangles we saw on some windows, not knowing what they might be. This was the seed for the novel, becoming a quest for Barbara.

While in Japan, I visited several Buddhist temples and noticed an addition to the four I had put together. Not only were there the red, black, yellow, and green/blue lotus blossoms, but there was a fifth in the middle that was white. On the stone monuments, there was a

fifth stone stacked atop the four stones representing the elements. This fifth represented heaven.

With this, I knew what Barbara's quest was: not only find which Cardinality should apply to her, but find the fifth Cardinality, the one that brings the other four together into a perfect union. This is her personal quest, not the driving force behind the plot and not something that I directly address in the novel. It was the center of a short story in which I explored Barbara's personality. The core of this became the basis for parts of Chapters II and IV. The quest itself dropped out completely.

The last group of four that I put together was Barbara's family. This decision had many implications for the world that I was building. Why four? The obvious answer is that everything is built on fours. The Muses have created a public religion around the concept of the Cardinalities, and families mirror that religion.

The more fundamental reason is that economics dictate the social structure.

If I thought that twentieth century America required twice the number of income earners than the traditional, Norman Rockwell family in order to support a middle-class family, then the post-apocalyptic future depicted in my novel would require twice as many again. Families with two incomes are able to out perform single income families in providing the darwinian advantage of good health and education for their children. Just as significant, these dual income families are accepted as commonplace, even expected, by society. Likewise, the four adult family had to be set within a context that would consider them the norm.

Economics is an easy way to examine the transfer of agency from one person to another, an important concern in postmodern texts because instead of following the money

trail, you need to follow the agency trail to find the responsible person. Economics otherwise plays a minor role in the setting.

In his short story, “The Tale of Old Venn,” Delany describes the transition from a barter to a money economy in the liminal time between barbarian and civilized society and its effect on agency. This reflection shows the flaws in the barter economy, but it also reveals some of the flaws in a cash economy that can only be resolved by a subsequent reflection of the money economy into a credit economy, though the tale does not completely address this second reflection (83–84).

Money is a reflection of a person’s ability to provide goods and services that are relevant to society. Wealth isn’t as much a measure of money as a measure of how much cash society is willing to move for the sake of a perceived benefit. Wealth is the item on which a trade is based, not the medium of exchange used to facilitate the trade (Graham 90). As such, money is not a measure of wealth, but of where wealth has been or soon will be (Delany, “Tale” 84).

My novel touches briefly on this effect of credit in Chapter II (page 24), illustrating the idea that credit is the proper reflection of money to place value in its proper place, providing agency to those who provide the most value to society instead of to those who can manipulate others.

Another important extrapolation in the setting is the role of churches. I conflated the roles of religion and psychology into the “memeçeutical” industry: the business of producing refined memes. Because I see religion historically as a tool of government, the memes are managed by the Muses as a way of pacifying society, even if that society is within the cities.

Everything outside the cities is considered the “wilds” and is not protected by the government—as far as the government is concerned, anything goes there even though the residents of the wilds have their own way of managing social resources and providing needed services. We recognize the wilds as representative of our own society when we see Adam going home to the proverbial house with the white picket fence in Chapter XII (page 139).

The trinitarians, then, are a reaction to the Muses and are based in the wilds since the Muses are dominant in the cities. This is roughly analogous to “left” and “right” in US politics with the major population centers tending towards the left and the rural areas tending towards the right. Since the trinitarians are a reaction to the Muses, they represent the way things were before the Muses. Because the Muses are the de facto (and de jure according to page 31) government, the trinitarians believe in the three-fold government that existed before the Muses.

Finally, we have St. Messien’s Home for the End of Time where the novel ends. This is a corruption of Olivier Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, or *Quartet for the end of time*, written while he was in a prisoner of war internment camp in Germany during World War II (Bourgogne). The description of the Home with its four parts is a combination of a fictional concentration camp and my memory of approaching Tōdai-ji in Nara, Japan. While I am not trying to cast aspersions on the temple in Nara by associating it with a concentration camp, both are in some sense holy sites. I was wanting to capture some of the religious awe that I felt while approaching the temple while at the same time painting the Home as a place where people would go but never leave. In its use of fours, the Home is a physical manifestation of the Muses and a target of the trinitarians.

C. Characterization

While science fiction tends to focus on the intricacies of the novel's setting, the creation of planets, governments, religions, and other trappings of speculative fiction, we must examine our ability to create believable individuals who can realistically inhabit such worlds if we are to provide a satisfactory answer to Le Guin's question that we raised in the opening paragraphs of this introduction: "Can a science fiction writer write a novel?"

Delany offers a rubric for constructing round characters in his essay, "Characters." Such a character typically exhibits "three different types of actions: purposeful, habitual, and gratuitous" (173). Purposeful actions move the plot forward while habitual actions provide insight into the character. Gratuitous actions are sprinkled throughout the text to provide the refinements that individualize the characters.

As a reader moves through the text, she unconsciously categorizes the character's actions and uses them to construct the plot and anticipate how the character might act in a new situation. By playing with the categories, the author can surprise her. The purposeful actions can become habitual, and the habitual can become gratuitous, turning the plot on its head and giving her a sense that she might not quite understand the characters.

The four main characters that make up the family are very similar even if they are different genders and spread across two or three decades in age. Adam is the youngest in his early twenties. Barbara is in her mid thirties. Charles is in his late forties, and Dora is a spry and young sixty-something nearing retirement.

The family is itself a character, and it is this character that moves forward along the plot. This hive mind approach to narration can be seen, for example, in David Brin's novel, *Kiln People*, in which the main character uses golems to go out into the world before inte-

grating their experiences into his memories. While there is no real integration of memories between family members, each chapter moves forward in time with no two consecutive chapters being told from the same point of view character. The memory integration is left as an exercise to the reader. By limiting the point of view characters to the members of the family, having the family consist of people who all do the same job and were in some way self-selecting, I can have a fairly consistent point of view personality. Even so, there are slight differences.

For example, Barbara stumbles down the hall toward her apartment in Chapter IV (page 46) and rights one of the numbers on the door that had fallen over. We also see Dora do the same when she leaves in Chapter VIII (page 89). However, the personalities being portrayed are very different. Barbara is in a fugue state where everything is automatic with little conscious control. For her, righting the eight is just part of the ritual of going home. Dora, on the other hand, is in control. Righting the eight for her is an afterthought that has no other meaning or consequence. It's setting things right. At most, it indicates a slight obsessiveness over detail. Adam doesn't even notice it in Chapter X (page 110). Nothing more is done with the apartment number. By showing how the characters react differently to an otherwise trivial thing—it doesn't affect the plot in any way—I show how the characters are different, even if they otherwise might seem similar in other situations. Beneath the surface, they have wildly different motivations moving them forward, indicating that by the end of the novel, they are on very different trajectories.

The rubric Delany proposes tries to flesh out all areas of a character, from the most visible, public actions to the most private that are known only to the character. Because so much science fiction seems focused on the public heroics of its characters and because I want to delve down into the most private areas of the character to examine who each

character is, I've focused much of the text on the sexuality of the characters, using their sexual responses to similar situations to draw out potential conflicts within the family. For example, Barbara admires the form of Luke in the beginning of Chapter II (page 20) as someone Adam might see as competition. Adam and Charles have very different reactions to the castration of Jared. Charles is disgusted (page 81) and is psychologically castrated by the bloody incident (page 102) while Adam finds the implied power structure arousing (page 116).

The individual characters tend to blend into the background, not only with the family, but all of the minor characters as well. Outside the family, this blending is accomplished primarily through the text instead of the narrative.

No characters have a surname. This accomplishes two things. It makes the characters familiar. We tend to know our friends by their given name. We rarely think of them in terms of their full name. The main characters in the novel should be our friends. We're going to know a lot more about them than a lot of real world acquaintances by time we finish the novel. It also further anonymizes the characters in manner similar to the way in which a less detailed cartoon provides anonymity by being iconic (McCloud 51). Anyone could be Adam, or Charles, or Barbara.

The lack of surnames serves a more subversive purpose though. It closes the loop on speculative fiction and the mainstream novel. Fantasy is just speculative fiction of the distant past during the liminal time between barbarism and civilization, especially if we accept the *Nevèryon* series as a study of the fantasy genre (Delany, "Sex, Race" 225). Single names represent everyone because they specify no one. They allow the named to become the anonymous hero who can save the world, rescue the woman, fight the dragon. They represent ideas and archetypes.

Each person in the world of this novel is required to identify with an archetype (Cardinality) defined by the Muses. Even so, I fight the tension of archetypes, fantasy, and the urge to pan back from the individual. I use the single name to zoom in on individuals and follow them through their thoughts and make them familiar to the reader. The result is a narrator that sits on the shoulder of the point of view character relaying to the reader everything he sees and everything he hears the character thinking. I bring the reader as much as possible into the mind of the character, as far away as possible from the global view.

The result of this method of characterization is a novel that is less a study of a new world as it is a character study of four individuals as components of a family. While the science fiction elements are an integral part of the novel—the Cardinalities, the memes, the virtual reality—and the novel would fail without them, the narrative focus is on the characters and how they are reacting to challenges in this world. This is the essence of Le Guin's question of science fiction writers being able to write a novel that was character centric, exploring the familiar, non-heroic people around us.

The novel is filled with these non-heroic people. The two boys trying to buy dinner (page 24), the mother with the crying baby (page 40), the sweeper at the train station (page 91). Dora and Barbara escaping at the end are not heroic. They are not saving the world, but looking out for each other. Adam disappears into the virtual reality system by the end and we never see what happens to him. Charles is at home, alone, wondering what's happening.

These are all ordinary Mrs. Browns fighting to get through life. We see them get off the train and are left wondering where they are.

CHAPTER II

BARBARA INVESTIGATES

Sunlight filtered through the closed blinds, casting the room in a yellow tint and highlighting the dust dancing in the air. Barbara listened to the radio playing quietly in the background as she stood in the doorway and looked at the body lying on the couch. The soft sound added to the calmness of the scene before her. People from the department were busy looking all around the body, taking samples and pictures. Measuring distances. But the body never moved. It was the quiet center of the universe at the moment.

Her heart had skipped a beat when she had first looked in and seen the face of the victim. She could have sworn that it was Charles. The face had been too similar. But on a second look, it wasn't. The virtual reality system in which she worked wouldn't have created a face that familiar to her. It was designed to disconnect her from the scene; to make her more objective. For it to bring emotion into the scene would have been a major bug in the system. But the eyes were the same brilliant blue and the mouth had the same smile that Charles had when he was sleeping. She would file a report when she was finished. The face-matching algorithm needed a little tweaking.

One of the body's arms hung off the couch, his hand open and palm upward as if catching something before it could fall to the carpet. The hand was empty and there wasn't anything on the carpet. Barbara glanced around the room looking for anything that might have fit in the hand, but she couldn't see anything that seemed reasonable. A glass paperweight sat on the coffee table. It's few frosted words were turned away from her. The rest of it was smooth and clean.

“Name is Luke. Cardinality is Rocket,” one of the policemen said to Barbara. “He is a twin single. Twenty years old and just left his family. He was considering starting a duo with Mark over there, another Rocket.” He pointed to the figure hunched over in the corner on a stool.

Barbara started putting together a history of Luke in her head as she slid around the photographer and walked over to Mark. Luke would have been born a twin. His twin would have stayed with his family, leaving Luke to find a family elsewhere or start one of his own. He probably had posted an advertisement on one of the underground personals sites and found Mark, though why two people with the same cardinality would want to hook up was beyond her. It wasn’t right—family members should complement one another, not compete. That was the whole reason for the four cardinalities. Four people, each from a different cardinality, could naturally form a family and provide mutual support. Anything different was bound to fail. Barbara shook her head. Luke had been young. Maybe he was searching for his real cardinality and was just trying out the Rocket.

She stood in front of Mark and watched as he rocked back and forth on the stool. She remembered the first time she had met Dora. She and Charles had been dating for a couple of months, grabbing lunch or dinner as her schedule allowed. They would meet in any of the several bars that lined the street across from their university’s campus. All through University, she had kept herself too busy with her studies to bother with dating until she had met Charles. But afterwards, she always looked forward to seeing him. She would catch herself daydreaming in class or while trying to study. Her grades did suffer a bit during their courtship, but she had squeaked by. She remembered her naïve sharing of everything with him and her pestering him for details about his day. She had been in love. He had been scouting for a valuable addition to his family business of being detective

for the local department. Dora's matronly manners had immediately put Barbara at ease. Dora was older than Charles and about fifteen to twenty years Barbara's senior. After their first dinner together, Dora had suggested that the three head back to the apartment that she shared with Charles. There, they continued the dinner conversation over another bottle of wine.

The next morning, Barbara woke in their bed and lay there while the other two still slept. She watched the sunlight creep across the ceiling, slowly marking the minutes that she could lie, undisturbed by the cares of school or anything else in life. She recognized the value in finding two people with whom she could relax and share life. Not long afterward, they had gone to the local civic office and formalized the relationship.

Barbara took Mark's head and pressed it against her chest as any good Fish would. She couldn't replace Luke in their relationship, but for a moment she could help him understand that all wasn't lost. He would get through this, at least until she had done her job there in the apartment.

"It's okay," she said. "We're going to find out who did this and make sure they never do it again."

Mark stopped rocking.

"Tell me what happened as best as you can remember."

"I found him lying on the couch when I came home from my shift helping another family with their rotation," Mark said, lifting his head a bit so she could hear him. "I opened the door and saw him as he is now. I immediately called for the police."

"Everything is as it was?" Barbara asked.

"I did not touch anything. I have read enough stories and seen enough shows to know not to do that," Mark replied. "I was shaken when I saw him lying on the couch, so I went

to the kitchen and got a drink. That gave me a couple minutes to calm down enough to call someone.”

“Did you notice anything different or out of place?”

“Luke usually sits on the couch and watches movies while reading. I always get after him for doing that because a person can not give proper attention to that many things at once. Today, he had the television and radio both going. I turned off the TV on the way in to the kitchen.”

After some more questioning and quiet reassurances, Barbara turned from Mark and looked over the room. She lingered on Luke. His face did bear an uncanny resemblance to Charles, but it had to be coincidence. The rest of his body didn’t look like Charles at all, even taking age into account. What at first had struck her as fright seemed more to be an expression of surprise. She knelt down and looked at his hands, taking special notice of the one turned upwards. Pressed into the palm was a slight outline of a triangle.

“Was he holding anything when you came in?” she asked Mark, looking up at his face.

He looked back at her without any emotion and shook his head, “No, why?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, not quite sure how to respond to the lack of body language from Mark. Even though she wasn’t the youngest in her family, she was still going through the various cardinalities searching for the one that fit her best. Her family encouraged the Rocket because of its concern for objective study of crime scenes, though each member had some of each of the other cardinalities even if they didn’t admit it. Emotion didn’t solve crimes, but a total lack of it didn’t seem right either, even from a Rocket like Mark.

After a few deep breaths and counting through a few numbers in her head, she nodded to Mark and turned to take another look at Luke. He had the healthy thinness of a virile

youth instead of the wasted gauntness of a heavy drug user. She wondered if the computer could really understand the nuances enough to render the difference.

Barbara turned off the virtual reality system and removed her goggles. Her eyes were always dry after the long VR sessions that gave her family its continuity and anonymity when investigating. She took the eye drops out of the desk drawer and put some in her eyes. Patterns burst across her vision as she rubbed her eyes hard, feeling the relief of the drops spread. She waited as the darkness receded and her peripheral vision returned. Her requests for shorter sessions and a humidifier were lost in the flow of paperwork that kept society moving. Even though paperwork no longer involved paper, the forests of her parents would not be forgotten so easily.

Something bugged her about the way Mark had answered about Luke holding anything. He must have known what she was looking for and simply refused to satisfy her. She had seen the marks on Luke's palm where the triangle had been pressed into the flesh, even if it was just a faint suggestion. If Mark knew what the object was, or that it was significant enough that he should remove it, then who else knew? She was always careful not to indicate anything out of the ordinary to anyone. Simple question with a seemingly simple answer every time.

This was her fifth case with a triangle in the palm. She hadn't thought much of the first few, but on the fourth, she realized something was odd. The first two or three might have been a coincidence, but after that there had to be a pattern somewhere. She had almost lost track of the earlier cases, but was able to find them without too much trouble. Each of them had been recent enough that she could remember enough unique details to pull them out of the department's databanks.

She had never found any mention of a triangle in the palm in any case report. She had searched through all of the department's on-line files using every conceivable search. She had gone through the old unsolved crime files from the years before the on-line system. When anyone had asked her why she was going through the old paper and computer files, she always expressed an interest in seeing how the old detectives worked.

All she had to go on at the moment were the files for four, now five, individuals. She hadn't been able to find anything to link the first four. Perhaps a fifth would help, though it would seem to narrow the search even more. There were three dead women and two dead men. Two from duos, two from trios, and one from a quartet. They ranged in age from twenty to forty—all in the standard working age range. Nothing significant seemed the same between any of them, while too much that seemed insignificant was the same. She hoped adding Luke would unearth some hidden connection.

Barbara sat down at the desk and brought up an integrating agent on the computer. She added Luke's case file to the collection of cases she was tracking and instructed it to find all the information it could on Mark and Luke, giving it the details she had gathered from the scene and downloaded from the VR. It would run quietly in the background, one of many unnoticed by her family as they came in for their shifts. By the time she came back in the morning, a full dossier would be waiting for her. Hopefully it would have something connecting Luke with the other four.

Before locking the computer and leaving for the evening, Barbara brought up the summary of the scene she had just finished. She looked at the lab results. The blood work was negative for any substance abuse, affirming her earlier hunch based on Luke's general weight distribution. The computer had gotten that part right, at least. No fingerprints or other spoor were found near Luke that didn't match him or Mark. It appeared to be a classic

locked-room case, just as the others had been. But locked-room cases weren't common. There were too many for them not to be connected in some way.

Without worrying herself with where Charles might be or why he might be running late yet again, Barbara locked the office and left for home. He was getting more and more careless about work, showing up late and leaving early. At least Dora had mentioned a few times getting to the office before her shift and finding it dark and locked. They had begun relying more on extensive notes on all the active investigations. While it did mean that their cases were very well documented, and the department did praise them for it, it also meant they weren't quite the team they could be in making the breaks that could solve a case. It amazed her what a little one-on-one talking could accomplish. Right now, they needed to work on strengthening Charles, help him realize he was hurting the rest of them by not showing up on time. Being late to work broke the flow of the investigations, even if the computers did most of the work. She would mention it to Adam again. Those two were close, like her and Dora.

The sidewalk was damp from an earlier rain and many in the crowds were carrying umbrellas. She hadn't expected rain that day and hadn't seen any in the VR earlier, though the VR often changed the weather to mask where the scene was in real life. Her mind went back to earlier. As usual, her avatar had been standing outside the apartment when she had entered the VR. She looked from building to building, searching for the one that would stand out in her mind. The one that her gut would recognize as possibly the one even though she knew that she could never find out. She always wondered if something from reality might have slipped past the censors and into the VR. There were only so many types of brick, colors of blinds, and carpet thicknesses. Surely some small detail would be let through. Otherwise, knowing what was always avoided would point to the real life location

just as well, given enough cases. Sometimes, knowing where a crime took place could be important.

Sunlight glinted off the windshields of the cars, making her eyes water. As she crossed the mottled street to the entrance to the subway station, she caught a quick motion behind the glare, but couldn't see anything when she looked. The rain had given most of the cars a light wash, causing them to sparkle, which is probably what she had seen. They were already beginning to dry and only a few drops remained on the cars. Those few that were still dusty must have belonged to people who could afford garages.

Barbara let herself go amid the rushing stream of people flowing down the steps and into the subway station. Only a small space separated those going down from those hurrying up, but that space was diligently maintained through an unspoken law. Even though several million people lived in the city and the daily tides of going to work and back home rushed them through the narrow galleries of the subway, those empty few inches between those coming and going were inviolate.

Once swept underground, the full force of the crowds and shops hit her. The aromas from the small bakeries made her stomach churn in anticipation of dinner with Dora. Every imaginable pastry was sold somewhere in the station: empanadas with meat and fruit; danishes topped with potatoes, cheeses, and jams; croissants, donuts, sticky buns rich with cinnamon, bagels. . . . The list was endless. She was hungry and looking forward to spending some time with Dora. A small bite to tide her over until she got home wouldn't hurt. The coffee shop near the ticket counter always had good sausage in a bun.

Ahead of her in line were two teenagers who weren't quite old enough to have small jobs to earn their first credit.

They must be going out for an early dinner on their family's credit, Barbara thought.

They had made their selections, but their accounts didn't have quite enough to cover the cost. They were trying to figure out which item to do without and still have enough to eat.

She watched them, remembering some of her early dates while she was still living with her parents. More than one of the guys (and a few of the girls) had developed a nervous tick when looking at the bill. Once, she had to pitch in a bit.

These boys in front of her were showing that same nervousness that comes with impending and unavoidable embarrassment.

"How much over is it?" Barbara asked the cashier.

The cashier responded that it wasn't much, but that it was also too much for him simply to overlook.

Barbara told him to put on her own tab what the boys couldn't pay. She would be having a sausage in a bun anyway, so paying a little more wouldn't hurt her. Besides, the boys probably deserved to have some time together. By the Muses, she thought, someone did.

She gave the cashier her consent to complete the transaction.

He gave them paper tickets for the food she and the boys had ordered.

These they gave to the cooks.

She smiled to herself. Despite all the progress that had been made under the Muses, the streamlining of society, the moves to automate all the jobs no one wanted to do, and the increased luxury of life, there were still times when the human touch was important. This was why she liked stopping here on the way home. Not because the food was good, though it was excellent, but because there were people here who cared. They might not be making a fortune working in a small pastry shop, but they were artists who took pride in

their creations. That craftsmanship was the spice that made their food worth every bit of credit she spent.

The boys thanked her profusely, bowing awkwardly a few times, as if not sure how to show their gratitude yet animated by a subconscious desire to make sure their benefactor understood how thankful they were.

She smiled and nodded. “Enjoy each other,” she said.

She turned to the kitchen window and took the small basket with her sausage in a bun. The meat was piping hot, succulent, and just the right amount to balance the soft and slightly sweet bread surrounding it. The flavor and texture caused her to close her eyes and let it sit in her mouth for a moment while she explored its tastes: salty, sweet, and meaty.

They were still the same flavors after all the years since one of her fathers would take her to work with him so that she could run around the office and interrupt the people trying to pay little attention to her—they had to get work done. She laughed to herself. The pranks she would pull!

She seemed to inconvenience one of her father’s colleagues (she always called him Jay even though his name was James) who no one really liked anyway. He was the type who wouldn’t ignore her, but instead would treat her like a small child. She hated that. She wanted to be grown up like her father. One day, when she was at her father’s office and Jay wasn’t there, she decided to play a trick on him. Across the room from his cubicle sat an empty cubicle near the water cooler. So she spent the morning quietly marking down on paper where everything was in his cubicle: the papers, the pens, paper clips, computer. Everything. She took her father’s ruler and measured distances and drew scale drawings. Then, after lunch, she took everything from Jay’s cubicle and moved it to the empty one

near the water cooler. She did this without anyone noticing because they were used to having her around, and because they had practiced studiously ignoring everything she did.

Her father told her later that when Jay returned to work the next day, he stood at his empty cubicle for several minutes without saying a word or moving, as if his world had suddenly collapsed on him and he hadn't a clue what to do next. He started wandering around asking others if they had seen his cubicle. After word had spread, people tried not to laugh when he asked them. Try as they might, only a few could keep a straight face. Finally, after an hour of asking around, he looked over into the formerly empty cubicle and saw all of his stuff there. It was exactly as he had left it, except that now it was in a different cubicle. No one knew how it got there because no one had been paying attention, except her father who thought the whole thing was hilarious anyway.

Jay had stayed in that cubicle by the water cooler until he left the company several years later. She had never gone around him again when she went in to the office, but she knew that he had been inconvenienced by people walking to and from the water cooler. She had had better things to do with her time after that.

Barbara finished her sausage on a bun and threw the wrapper into the trash bin that sat between the coffee shop and the subway ticket machine. She selected a ticket for home and credited it to her account. The machine spit out a small paper ticket with a magnetic strip on one side and the printed destination on the other. She walked over to the proper platform to wait for the train.

Barbara marveled as the usual afternoon crowd began gathering. A government might be democratic and represent every area of the country, but it could never capture the diversity of a subway platform. Two girls sat together on a bench by the trash bins. They leaned towards one another and whispered back and forth, giggling once in a while and glancing

at everyone else standing around, as if hoping no one would notice them. An elderly gentleman strolled along the platform picking up paper trash and throwing it away, doing his part to keep the country clean. A group of boys ran down the steps and through the gates with their pre-paid student passes. They wore the stiff, button-down navy blue uniforms of their high school, all alike. The lights glinted off the polished brass buttons on their coats.

A quick movement caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. When she turned to look for it, nothing was there but the growing crowd waiting for the train. It had been just like the movement she had caught on the street, but closer.

Barbara could hear the train approaching in the tunnel. The clickity-clack of its wheels drew further and further apart as it slowed. A rush of air blew from the tunnel as the light of the train appeared. At the same time, she felt a hand on her back pressing her forward.

CHAPTER III

CHARLES GOES TO A MEETING

Charles was running late yet again, not to work, though he would be late to the office, but to the meeting with the committee that had him by his balls and wouldn't let go. The street was empty except for a few boys playing down a ways. They were kicking a ball back and forth in the hot sun. Their shorts and t-shirts were torn and draped limply on their wiry frames.

Charles didn't stare too closely at them. He wasn't sure who they worked for. The Muses didn't have complete control of the wilder parts of the city, the parts that ran the black market, the drug runs. The Muses allowed such areas to exist as an escape for the rest of society. Bottle people up too much and they explode. Allow them a little fun on the side, perhaps an illegal operation or two, and everyone is happy. The trains ran on time where it mattered most.

The day was hot for Charles. The boys weren't sweating too much, at least from how they looked at this distance, but he was drowning in his own sweat. He felt like a ham left out on the counter, oily sweat pooling above his eyes and running down into them, making them sting. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

The committee, that nefarious group that had been hounding him ever since he had left college and his days as a naïve, idealistic student who cared where his country was going not out of any selfish need but because he actually did care, had requested his presence. There was no way out if he was to save the honor of his family. What he did now, he did not for himself, but for the benefit of his family, especially Adam. It had been a long

time since he had been the young student caught up in the revolution, but he hadn't lost the idealism that made him care about what happened to his family.

Adam was the youngest member of their family and had been with them almost a year now. It was taking a while, but he was slowly integrating with the rest of them. Charles loved Adam, but sometimes he got frustrated when he didn't know how to tell Adam what he wanted to tell him: that he loved him, but needed his own space; that he wasn't going to leave the family; that Adam needed to depend on himself more, and that the family would be there for him. Anything he told Adam along those lines would probably be taken as rejection.

Even though the sun was past its noon, the heat beat down making him stop every once in a while and wipe the sweat off his brow. He kept glancing furtively at the alley entrances looking for the small signs the committee had given him as directions. He had yet to be sent to the same place as before. The cracks in the sidewalk passed him by silently. He was looking for a swimming Sword.

One sixty three.

One sixty four.

One sixty five. . . .

The committee hadn't eliminated him yet. He hoped it was because they still found him useful. He didn't want to become another statistic that his family would have to investigate and then replace. He wanted to retire first and make room for someone else like Adam to join.

Charles had first run into the committee at university years ago, back when he was still young and foolish. He had been a bit more political then and had traveled around various universities trying to organize local student groups. He had preached that democracy was

the religion of secular government—it was no less an opiate than any other religion had been in previous regimes. For all the propaganda of the government, it supported self determination when that determination aligned with its own desires for the people. Countless democratic elections had been overthrown or nullified in Japan, Chile, Palestine, Iran, and others. Self determination was only for the wealthy.

The economy hadn't been doing very well back then and it still wasn't fully recovered. Jobs had been scarce and money tight. What people did thousands of miles away seemed too remote to really matter when you were worried about finding the money to eat and pay the rent. His message drew a lot of attention on campuses where students were being taught how to get a job and be yet another cog in society instead of how to create wealth and determine their own future.

But then came Black Sunday, when those in power had the police stamp out those who were struggling to rise up. When the police raided his apartment and the homes of all the student leaders who were involved. As the government had done in foreign countries, it drove underground any elements that sought self-determination counter to its own design. Some had escaped and disappeared. Others had simply disappeared, never heard from again. He was one of the lucky ones who had been caught and released, perhaps in the hope that he would lead the authorities to other members. But he had kept his head low, not wanting to risk exposing anyone else.

Having lived through the Vietnam and Iraq protests, having survived the greed and ineptness of several presidents, the government decided it didn't want to risk yet another upheaval that could lead to its overthrow if society lost all trust in it. The next day, the President signed a bill establishing the Muses, a committee to oversee society, shielding approved activities and speech from any liability. The committee was established to help

lighten the load on the overburdened courts and to lighten the cost of the litigation on an already depressed economy. They called it the Second Contract. It was a second chance to create an enlightened society.

With the Muses came the Cardinalities: the orthogonal Fish and Rocket and the opposite Sword and Cross. The empathetic earth mother, the womb, and the origin of life represented by the supple Fish swimming in the warm, salty ocean water. The pursuit of knowledge and truth represented by the hard Rocket poised to go into the unknown. The battle cry of death and destruction, of the masculine, territory, and protection represented by the Sword thrust into the ground. And finally, the sanctity of correct thought, of tradition, safety, construction and femininity represented by the Cross rising above the crowd gathered at its base. These four were the poles about which society was expected to coalesce, to provide a balanced foundation upon which to build a well-working family and society.

Through the years since, he had rehearsed the furtive glances that might bring recognition. He had gone through the script in his head trying to find the right phrases and key words, the shibboleths, that would let the other person know that he knew who they were and that he couldn't acknowledge them because someone was watching him. "Do you know George?" "Have you been to Happy in July and seen the twisting, towering thunderclouds?" Not that he understood the significance of either of those questions, but what kind of questions would they be if everyone knew them?

He had met Dora and started a family with her. He would spend hours awake at night, lying quietly next to her in bed. He wouldn't move a muscle, letting his body rest while pretending to be asleep. He spent those hours running the scenes over and over in his head, rehearsing everything he would do the next day so he wouldn't slip up and ruin everything

he had been working towards. In all the years since Black Sunday, no one had tried to contact him.

Until recently. A few months prior, he had found a note in the VR while on a routine investigation. It had been scribbled on a small piece of paper and left crumbled in the corner of the bedroom where a woman had been raped the night before. He had been there looking for anything unusual. He was surprised that the cleaning crew hadn't swept it up. He took it, unfolded it, and read a short note addressed to him. It was signed from George.

Chills had run up his spine and down his neck. He had felt the hair on his arms stand up for a second. No one used their names in the VR. No one at a crime scene could know who was there in the VR behind the models. Whoever could place a note in the VR's rendering of a crime scene, make it unnoticed by the regular cleaning crew, and know which name to address it to could not be ignored. He still hadn't known who George was or why the name was significant—he just knew that it was—but the name combined with the contents of the note told him that it was tied to the group he had been preparing for all those nights he had lain in bed. How they were connected to the VR was something he intended to find out.

All the note had said was his name, a location (marked by the sign of the Swimming Sword—the Fish sign with the Sword replacing the Fish), a date, and a time. Nothing else. No indication of who had placed it other than the name, George, whoever that might be. He obviously had well-connected friends. No indication of what the meeting might be about. He had copied the note to his clipboard before destroying it. Every month or two since then another note just like the first had popped up at a scene. No two meetings had been held in the same place yet. He couldn't imagine who but the government could have the resources to arrange such a wide array of obfuscations.

He had taken the subway across town to the older and poorer section. Those who had been unlucky enough to be in the lower echelons of society had never been able to scrape together enough to move to the more affluent and less crime-ridden suburbs. Crime was just part of society here, as taxes were elsewhere. Both worked to redistribute income from the less needy to the more needy. The government had (and still) treated the economy as a game that required balancing. Too much money and too many people could buy the same things. Too many people with the same things meant those things were no longer rare, no longer status symbols, and no longer worth having. The Muses maintained a price list to ensure a steady supply of status items, to protect the stable elements of society.

The subway was one place where almost everyone in society met, except for those who could afford their own cars and drivers. Anyone who could afford such luxury didn't have time to fuss with the details of life. They didn't need to be burdened by the mother with the hungry, crying child, or the old man swatting at imaginary flies and exuding a stench so powerful that it turned the stomach from the other end of the subway car.

Charles didn't live in luxury or in squalor. His family was solidly middle class. They lived in an old, established apartment building with personality: faded paint that had seen many years of children running up and down its now broken stairs, the graffiti on the walls bearing testimony to the freedom that their society enjoyed, and the bare bulbs casting their light undimmed upon the world. They lived in an apartment with second hand, gently used, sturdy furniture that could hold up to another family. He made a habit of only eating a light lunch before taking the subway. Despite not having his own car and driver, he lived with a wonderful family that made everything else bearable.

Charles remembered his childhood years ago when he had created a whole language for when he would rule the world. He had imagined vast underground cities of steel that

would be worlds unto themselves, ignoring and ignored by the world above. Those had been the years when you could dream and anything could come true. Forty years since, he was running through a street, his own dreams long since abandoned, hoping now that the younger members of his family could have a fighting chance at their own dreams.

He cursed under his breath at his own tardiness. Where was the sword swimming in the water? Adam thought he had left early for work and had fussed about being left behind. He wasn't as dependent on Charles as he had been when they first met, but sometimes he still tried his patience. He loved the guy, but Adam was young enough to let his emotions get in the way. Deep down, Adam was a Fish with his ability to read those around him, empathize with them, and naturally respond in ways that drew people out. Charles shook his head. The last thing we need in this family is a strong Fish to screw up our long history of accuracy in our research, he thought. But we need to figure Barbara out first. She had been bothering him about being late to work, which he had been, but at the same time, it wasn't as if he were wasting time and giving the family a bad name. He had been late because of where he was going at the moment, which he was late for as well. That was the one thing that could give them a bad name.

The earpieces played the familiar braided rhythms and melodies of the "Requiem" from *Akira*, an old animé from before the Muses and the Second Contract. The Muses scrupulously observed and noted observance of first amendment rights. This particular piece would win him a positive mark because it showed unity through disparity. Each part lead smoothly into the next, but each was in a different style just as a family was unified from many parts, each playing its role at the right time. European and Asian musical traditions reinforcing one another as husbands and wives should.

The notes from the friends of George had complicated his role. In addition to the usual shift at the family position as detective, he had caved in to pressure from these friends and agreed to help the local social health office work on a few cases in exchange for the department overlooking some of Barbara's curiosities. As with any intelligence work, he had to be careful about sharing his moonlighting with others, including his family. No one knew he was doing this. The department had to continue sending the tardy notices and threats to the family just in case he backed out. The family kept haranguing him about his carelessness. He knew what was at stake though—the family's position and Barbara's personal growth. Without that position, the family would disperse as it ran out of funds and was unable to find work. He would lose Adam. He'd also lose Barbara and Dora. Barbara would become a shell of herself as the system beat her down to fit in, as it had him. He cared most for Adam though and didn't want to lose him.

And here was the mark, slightly above eye level and lightly in chalk. Three wavy lines with a vertical line off center and through the middle line, pointing to the right down an alley. The building was an old, worn out warehouse. A few bricks were missing from the face and stunted weeds grew up in the crack between the sidewalk and the wall, as if even nature were tired and couldn't muster the energy to fight against what society had done.

The street was nearly empty.

An older man in a ragged coat and a silver dress walked slowly down the other side of the street pulling a small cart behind him. He was brown from the sun and lean from the street. His hat drooped off to the side almost ready to fall. His smile flashed briefly in the sun as he sang to himself, his head bobbing up and down watching the ground and the sidewalk in front of him.

Charles walked around to the back of the building looking for a door or some other less obvious entry. The other times it hadn't been the first thing that caught his eye. The entrance that everyone else should find would not lead to where he needed to go. The first time he had gone to meet with the group, he had taken the obvious entrance only to find an empty room and some sawdust on the floor. He had stood there for a good ten minutes looking around the room before someone had come in to get him. They were careful about hiding. At every point, someone who didn't know what to look for would be led to see nothing unusual.

There it was, hidden behind some boards leaning against the wall. A shadow slightly larger than it needed to be, slightly out of whack with the boards, boxes, and canisters between it and the sun. Walking over to it revealed a narrow opening in the wall that he could squeeze through after breathing out and straightening his shoulders. Dora was feeding him too well. Inside, he stood still and let his eyes adjust to the darkness.

A man in a black suit motioned for him to follow, his face and hands the only things perceptible in the dark. Not wanting to run into anything, Charles walked directly for the man, keeping his eye on his nape and listening to his footsteps.

Charles heard a faint hiss behind him and any light that had filtered in from outside disappeared. A low, red light seemed to come from the walls and diffuse through the air, giving him just enough light to see where he was going, but without enough detail to know where he was. The glow followed them and slightly preceded them. The man led him through a series of corridors and down the occasional stair. Once in a while, they would pass another corridor, but he could only see the outline of the opening in the wall, nothing actually down it.

After a few turns and stairs, he wasn't sure how to get back. Anyone who happened across the entrance would get just as lost without a guide and without the red glow, assuming they were able to get through the door that had closed near the top. Eventually, his guide stopped and a door opened, revealing an elevator dimly lit by a white light that seemed harsh after so long in the red light. They entered and the doors closed.

As the elevator went down, the light level slowly increased until it was as bright as a normal, everyday office. At the bottom, the doors opened and Charles watched in a full width mirror as they stepped out into a brightly lit room. A single VR unit stood in the center, ready for the day's session. His guide stationed himself beside the elevator doors and put his hands behind his back.

Charles looked at the VR suit and back at his guide.

His guide nodded at the suit.

Charles put it on, finishing with the VR goggles blocking out all of the light from the room.

He saw and felt darkness, a heady, rushing stillness as if he were falling while standing still. A jolt and a buzzing. His fingers and toes tingled as the VR suit integrated his senses. He heard and felt a crackle to the right. Then the left. Behind. Within. A pinhole light formed in the center of his visual field, growing, warping as it shifted from convex to concave and back, tuning itself to his visual processing. Water rippled, still as ice, breaking and billowing away in the quiet breeze of his imagination, revealing the virtual reality he now found himself in.

CHAPTER IV

BARBARA GETS HER MEMES

Barbara felt a hand on her back pressing her forward as the train came out of the tunnel. She quickly twisted as she took a half step forward, hoping to catch off guard whoever it was behind her. But no one was there except the usual crowd. No one suspicious. No one who shrunk back from her or looked at her. She still felt the residual impression of the hand on her back.

The train came to a stop and the doors in front of her opened. People flooded out. Even more flooded in, with Barbara in the lead. She walked into the car and looked for a seat, but they were all taken. The train was full. The train made a loop around the city and was usually getting full at this time of day. She wasn't expecting a seat, but she'd feel safer if she were in one. Very few people lived where they spent almost a quarter of their life, instead spending almost half a day a week between home and office. It was half a day a week they could spend listening to a book or composing a song; half a day a week of group meditation as they coursed through the tunnels and viaducts of the city rail system. Society's first line of defense against unrest had become the packed rail cars. Citizens were the Muses' cattle that fed the machinery of society.

Barbara grabbed one of the overhead straps so she could steady herself as the train moved from the station. The people around her bumped into her at random as the train swaggered down the track, sometimes in rhythm reinforcing each other, other times not. Barbara could hardly feel it, but when she looked outside the window, she could see the tunnel lights blinking past faster and faster as the train sped up. Then, when the lights were flying past so quickly that they were like strobe lights in an otherwise unlit room, the

tunnel ended and the train flew out into the open air and bright sunlight. Her eyes closed against the sudden light. She forced them open to see how far the construction crew had progressed. Her eyes watered from the effort, but she could make out a few hundred more feet of fresh track laid on top of the cross ties she had seen that morning. New cross ties were on the ballast she had seen put down before. And new ballast was a few hundred feet ahead of where it had been. Before too long, that station she had just left would have a new train to help relieve some of the crowding. Less crowding would make listening to books, composing music, and meditation easier.

Perhaps they would start segregating the cars. Mothers in special cars with more seating so they could care for their children. Especially that short brunette in the corner, Barbara thought. The woman had a baby with her that was crying. She was carrying it on her chest strapped into a harness. Every few minutes, she would bounce the baby up and down, trying to quiet it but with no effect. The crowds and noise were keeping it awake. The woman rummaged through a small fanny pack and brought out a bottle of what looked like milk. She squeezed a few drops onto her finger and tasted it before trying to give the bottle to the baby, but it batted its hands at the bottle and kept crying. She looked at those around her and shrugged her shoulders, apologizing.

“I’m sorry for bothering you,” she said to no one in particular, but meant for everyone around her. “We don’t normally travel during this time of day.” Her voice broke. She glanced at everyone’s chests surrounding her.

Barbara looked away, wishing that the baby would be quiet so she could think. This was a precious time for her, moments when she could be alone with her own thoughts, when she was free to think on anything instead of her work or family obligations. The shrill voice in her ear did nothing to help her concentration. Mothers with young children

should be more considerate, she thought. But she wouldn't say anything. If she was going to be a Fish, she would have to learn to put up with interruptions like this. Fish were the mothers of society, tracing their philosophies back thousands of years to the early earth mothers, those nurturing, generative, natural religions. Or so the Muses told them.

The Earth embodied balance, and Barbara wanted balance. She held on to the strap so she wouldn't fall as the train swayed, but she remembered when she had been younger and had been able to ride the train as if it were a skateboard or a pair of skis. She would stand in the middle of the car surrounded by the crowd, her feet set apart, her hands at her side. She would sway with the train, keeping herself upright regardless of what happened around her. She would close her eyes knowing where she was in the city from the rhythm of the train. She no longer could do that. She had grown older and had forgotten who she was and where she should stand.

Her stop was next and coming up quickly. While she had been lost in thought, the train seemed to stop and the world glide by, now slowing down until it came to rest quietly outside her window.

Barbara had just enough time to drop by one of the discount churches and pick up the prescription her memesist had given her the day before for depression. She had yet to find a cardinality she felt comfortable with. Everyone else settled in on theirs during their teenage years as they learned their social skills. She had spent too much time on her studies to care about other people, so she had started out as a Rocket trying to find out what made the world work—what was true. She had even tried some of the organized guilds and neighborhood groups, but nothing seemed to fit her. The more she tried to find reality, the more it seemed to elude her, always just beyond the next bend of thought. So now she was

trying to be a Fish to see if she could square that with her maternal instincts. Let her womb do some of her thinking.

She looked forward to her time alone in a tub of hot water, relaxing, reading through the memes that might keep her fears at bay and help her be a better Fish. It was also time alone to reflect on work, putting puzzle pieces together, digging through the subconscious. The world had come a long way since the days of widely used anti-depressants and simple, ineffective memes. Sticks and stones could break bones, and the right words could heal. Now medicines were used only in the more serious cases where simple mental conditioning wasn't sufficient—not all ailments could be corrected through exercise, even mental exercise, but exercise was preferred when it worked.

Barbara pushed open the glass door of the corner discount church. The door had its usual cardinal symbols frosted on the glass: a circle surrounded by Cross, Rocket, Sword, and Fish. The neon sign in the window had fortune Easter eggs at only fifty cents a dozen for Fish. She let the door close behind her. The small brass bell announced her presence.

The attendant looked up at Barbara.

She nodded back.

All modern churches were well regulated and dependable. They differed primarily in price and service. For what Barbara was looking for, any church would have worked. They all had access to the latest memes. This particular one had been here for years, ever since Barbara had been in the area. The employees were always nice. The lights were always on. The place was always clean. The memes were always cheap. They didn't even put out a tip jar like some of the more overtly commercial churches did, always looking for that extra bit of credit and destroying the community's goodwill towards them in the process.

Barbara walked to the front of the church, past the aisles with their tacky merchandise: black prayer books, clear plastic bottles with various waters and oils, and cardinal necklaces with blue fish, yellow rockets, red swords, and black crosses. She looked to the raised dais with its grey, plastic altar and its four corners topped with simple, round posts, one for each of the four cardinal colors and signs. Simple track lighting hung from the ceiling, creating a pool of light around the altar in the otherwise darkened alcove. She knelt for a moment before it and made the bird sign before rising and walking to the side.

She entered one of the four booths lining the wall and closed the opaque plastic door behind her. The walls were barren, white, and smooth. The air handler whispered from the ceiling. She threw the latch on the door and a knee bench rose out of the floor at the back of the small room. It showed the indentations that came from the many customers who had knelt in this booth since the church first opened. She lowered herself and placed her knees on the bench, arranging her dress to make sure it didn't get stretched in the process; her knees fit comfortably. Before her, a light came on behind a small, clear window which slid open while a dry voice came from the metallic grill above it, asking for her prescription. A yellowed and grimy but visibly artificial hand appeared in the window with its palm up. The invisible hand of the Muses made manifest to guide her. The faint pressure outline of the hand on her back came back, trying again to push her in front of the subway train. But it was the idea of the hand this time, and not the hand itself. A mere memory of earlier.

Barbara placed her prescription in the palm of the hand and watched it withdraw. The window slid closed without making a sound.

Her eyes wandered about the booth. The linoleum was worn near her toes. Dust hid in the corners. One of the fluorescent bulbs was buzzing and flickering, dying a slow, mournful death, unsettled with the newest addition in its family and ready to retire. She let

her eyes glaze over as she drank in the flicking light, letting it course through her. It didn't feel quite random, but it didn't seem to be any pattern that she knew. She reached into her purse and set her tablet computer to record. While it wouldn't be a clear video, she'd be able to extract the flicker pattern later and analyze it. If nothing else, she could test the assumption that the flickering was random, at least after taking into account any driving from the electrical system.

After a few minutes, the window slid open again and the hand came out offering in its palm the solace of her prescription and a small memory stick. Words of comfort to rest on her tongue and in her mind. She took both and put the prescription in her purse from which she retrieved her electronic tablet. She pressed a small button on it and slid the memory stick in. The tablet downloaded the text from the stick and sounded a quiet ping. She removed the stick and placed it back on the hand, which returned to its place within the wall. The window slid closed with an audible click this time, this audience with the hand of the Muses finished. She stood up, turned around, and left the booth with her tablet in her right hand.

She returned down past the aisles to the back of the church. The necklaces caught her eye again, causing her to stop and look at them. Unable to settle on one, she turned and continued on to the checkout counter where the attendant stood waiting for customers. Barbara returned the ritual greeting and plugged her tablet into the register to pay for the texts.

Barbara gave a short nod to the attendant and turned from the counter. She pushed open the door, trying not to ring the bells but failing. She winced at the sound as she stepped through. Another wince when the door closed and the bells rang again. She took a deep breath, let out a sigh, and turned from the corner church with its colorful neon sign

and cheap advertisements embedded in its glass front. Firecrackers and napalm for those living by the Sword.

She walked along the sidewalk, paying special attention not to step on the cracks. People passed on either side, some occasionally but softly bumping her, jostling her. A cool, stiff wind blew through the street. A tabby cat ran across the sidewalk chased by a chihuahua. The dog was yipping the whole way, but the cat was silent. The street lights were already coming on. She wrapped her coat around her and put her head down to break a way through the icy throngs of people.

A few blocks from the church, Barbara turned in from the sidewalk to the doorway of their apartment building. She fished for her keys in her purse under the dim, flickering glow of the light above her, pulling out a large key ring filled with keys in different shapes, some long and some short. She stood in the doorway with her keys out of her shadow and searched through them a few times until she found the one for the door, using it then to unlock the heavy steel door. It swung open and she winced at its squeals of protest. It started to swing back, but she caught it with her body, opening the inner door. She walked through into the foyer, careful to catch the heavy door with her hand as it swung shut. She slowly closed the inner door. She felt as if she were in a small cave with its walls closing in and wanted to scream, but couldn't yet. She needed to get home to Dora and safety. She could count on Dora.

A bare yellow bulb hung from a dark hole in the white ceiling. Tenants and visitors had worn a path down the center of the orange carpet over the years. The patterned wallpaper was hanging in strips in some places and scratched away in others, revealing white gouges in the drywall behind the paper. Children had drawn a wainscot of pictures. Barbara moved through this and into the stair well. She gingerly climbed the creaking stairs, counting each

one and trying not to put too much weight on the banister lest it give way and take her down with it. After several flights and a few circuits around the well, she came to her floor. It was no different than all the others, but it was the right number of flights and the right number of turns from the ground floor. She walked down the hall to the apartment, counting the doors as she went, and righted the fallen eight on the door before trying to unlock the bolt.

The key wouldn't turn. Barbara frowned a bit and jiggled it, but it still didn't turn. Worried, she picked out the key for the other bolt and tried to slip it into the lock, but it wouldn't go either. Barbara looked at her keys. She had righted the number as usual. She had the right keys. The right number of bolts to unlock. The right building. She had counted the stairs and the turns. The door was the right number from the stairs. But the keys didn't fit the lock.

Her family wouldn't have changed the locks on her, would they? No, if they didn't want her, they would have let her know in less subtle ways. Someone would have said something. Dora would have said something, surely. She was close to Dora and could trust her to be honest. The numbers on the door began to blur and run together as tears welled up.

After a few minutes of pounding on the door, it opened and a woman peered out.

"Who are you?" Barbara asked, not recognizing her. "Where's Dora?"

"Who are you?" the woman responded. "And who's Dora?"

Barbara repeated the questions because she didn't recognize the woman and didn't think this woman should be in her own family's apartment. She didn't know what else to ask.

"You're the one that pounded on the door," the woman explained. "I don't know you. Why should I tell you who I am when you won't tell me who you are?"

Finally realizing that she wouldn't get a response from the woman if she continued her questions, Barbara said, "I'm Barbara."

"Thank you," the woman said. "My name is Eve. I think you have the wrong apartment. Which number are you looking for?"

Barbara told her about the number of stairs she climbed, the number of turns she had turned, and the number of doors she had passed. She mentioned the fallen eight that she had righted and the bolts on the door.

Eve pointed down the hall. "I think you want the one around the corner. It's the only other door on this floor with a fallen eight. You just took a wrong turn when you came out of the stair well."

Barbara mumbled an apology and shuffled off, leaving Eve to close the door.

Taking a deep breath, releasing it, and repeating a couple times to calm her nerves and try to get some semblance of normalcy for Dora, Barbara prepared to enter the apartment. The number was right. She must have taken a wrong turn coming out of the stairs. That wasn't like her. She should have stopped by the church right after getting the prescription instead of waiting until today. She righted the fallen eight and unlocked the bolts. Her keys worked. She opened the door and entered.

"I'm home," Barbara called out quietly. Charles would have put Adam to bed before leaving; the door to their bedroom was closed.

"Hungry?" Dora called from the kitchen. "I just finished making dinner."

Barbara set the table for two while Dora took the food from the stove.

"Anything to drink?" Dora asked.

Barbara shrugged. "After the way today went, I think a good, stiff drink might be good." She looked at the food, delightful in its simplicity. That was something that seemed

to escape Barbara, especially in the kitchen. She enjoyed the combinatoric complexity that could lead to the simple answer, instead of reaching the simple answer itself. Her baroque to Dora's modern.

A few clinks, a whoosh, a cabinet door opening and closing, and Dora returned with a large glass. "As you like it. Stirred, not shaken, with salt."

Barbara took the margarita and sipped it. Perfect. Balanced. She closed her eyes and thought back over the day, thankful that Dora was there for her.

"Charles was late again," she said.

CHAPTER V

CHARLES ATTENDS HIS MEETING

Charles jumped back from the edge of the ledge, hitting up against a wall, and stared down at the cars rushing by hundreds of feet below him. Even though he knew this was all just in his head, his body still responded with its fear of heights and falling. He ran his hands over the grainy texture of the wall feeling the ridges of large inclusions and the grittiness of cement.

Stucco.

The wind whipped his hair about and tried to tear him off the ledge, threatening to send him hurtling to a certain, imagined death. Even though he knew this was all an illusion, his body's instincts still fought to take over.

Typical.

Place him in a location that would try to throw him off balance. Somewhere that would cause his body to respond, overriding his own intellectual sense of place and safety. If they had any real imagination, they might succeed. Instead, they always seemed to dig up the stereotypical scenes from old horror and noir movies. Nothing like true suspense.

Standing out against the grey dankness of the city, a sleek, bright, yellow hover car came up beside the ledge and opened its door revealing a rich, leather interior. A young, blond, and obviously female driver motioned to him. He sighed to himself and climbed in.

"Where are we going today?" he asked, turning to take in the pleasingly curvaceous woman. She wasn't thin, but she wasn't fat either. She had enough.

She was sexy.

She also had a handgun.

He kept his thoughts to himself.

“Somewhere you haven’t been yet. A surprise,” she replied, a smirk trying to break through her stolid face. He nodded and leaned back to enjoy the ride. This wasn’t too bad of a replication. Tall buildings rose up, forming a canyon within which floating roads carried hovering cars and soft curves replace hard corners and sharp turns. If he tried, he could just make out the faint voice of a woman singing blues drifting up from a nightclub somewhere in the city below.

They appeared to be heading towards a large tower that disappeared into the sky. He could see occasional landing platforms and protuberances up and down the height of the tower. Shadows passed across its lit windows, causing them to blink. As they drew closer, he could see cars flitted about in higher concentrations as bees near a hive, ferrying information and people in and out. They landed on one of the platforms near the bottom, but high enough to look out over the other buildings in the city.

The car door opened, but as Charles reached for the door to help himself out, she pushed a folded piece of paper in his shirt pocket.

“Until next time,” she said.

He turned to get a last glimpse of the driver. Without even a slight hiss, the door closed again and the car left, leaving him alone on the platform. The door behind him opened, framing his shadow in a trapezoid of light running off the platform. He turned from the busy city below and entered the door, stepping into another corridor like the one that had taken him to the room with the VR. This corridor was lighted. He recognized Jared, the social health agent whom he had been working with, the first familiar face on the way to this meeting.

“You are late,” Jared said, tapping his watch.

“Adam couldn’t understand why I needed to leave early. I was too tired to make a good excuse.” Charles said, still thinking about the driver. He looked at Jared again, letting his eyes roam. “You’re looking good today.”

“Thank you. I have been working on tweaking myself a bit based on your comments last time. Do you like it?” Jared asked, turning around to let Charles see.

“I do. Too bad we’re here on business.”

“Perhaps I can arrange something, but that will have to wait. The others are waiting right now. We may have made a breakthrough in the case we have been tracking. We would like you to confirm what we suspect.”

Jared explained the details as they walked to the meeting room. Charles half paid attention, partly distracted by Jared’s beautiful, delectable ass, and partly trying to find the surprise, the thing that would show that the direction he was thinking wasn’t the right one. Jared was always going into far more detail than was needed. While he appreciated the effort, Charles often had to ignore it and gather the puzzle pieces himself. Committees rarely could match the intelligence gathering abilities of intelligent individuals.

A door irised open and they stepped into a circular room dominated by a large, round table in the center. The table had the texture of expensive wood with a slick finish. Nothing else was on it. It looked like any other table Charles had seen. Around the table sat four men with dark shades and black suits, all alike, avatars of whatever automatons were managing the data integration for the case. Two empty chairs sat near the door. Jared and Charles sat down.

“Sorry for being late,” Charles said. “I think you might be on to something, but I’d like to see a recording of the incident first.”

One of the men in black touched an area on the table near him. A screen turned on in the wall and the lights dimmed.

They watched

A detective standing in the door way. The body of a young woman lying on a coffee table, her eyes wide and sightless.

“That is Brad,” Jared explained. “The body belongs to Laura.”

Dust dancing in the sunlight filtering through the closed blinds. A radio playing quietly in the background.

Brad walks over to and stands before a young man on a chair.

“The young man is Michael.”

The young man starts rocking and Brad holds the young man’s head to his chest.

“Tell me what happened,” Brad says.

“I found her lying on the table when I came home from my shift helping another family with their rotation,” Michael says, lifting his head to be heard. “I opened the door and saw her as she is now. I immediately called the police.”

“Everything is as it was?” Brad asks.

“I did not touch anything. I have read enough stories to know not to do that,” Michael replies.

After some more questions, Brad kneels down and looks at Laura’s hands.

“Was she holding anything when you came in?” he asks Michael, looking up at his face.

“Stop the recording there,” Charles said.

Michael looks back without emotion and shakes his head, “No.”

The man in black who had started the recording touched the table again and the screen froze. Michael's face filled the wall, looking across the table at Charles.

"He obviously knows something," Charles said, referring to the face filling the wall. "Even though he wants to show nothing that could give him away, he overcompensates and not only shows no surprise, but he shows nothing at all. If he truly knew nothing, his face would either show some tension from the stress of the events or it would be relaxed in catharsis. We see neither."

"Of course," Jared said. "We noticed the same things about Michael. But what about Brad?"

"We've been satisfied every other time that no one there saw any significance in the question. He's done a good job not making it stand out. I don't think there's any connection between Brad and Michael, but we should probably keep an eye on both of them." Charles chuckled to himself. "That doesn't really answer the question though." He looked down at his feet.

He imagined himself barefoot. He could just make out his toes in his shoes. The men in black, the avatars, probably hadn't been programmed for human dress protocol. He had tried to do this every time he was in the VR. Something about his connection to the VR was evolving because the more he tried, the closer he came to success. He looked up and imagined them sitting at the table naked. Their suits began to fade, revealing more than he desired to see at that point. He quickly imagined them wearing suits again. He hadn't tried this with Jared yet, both because he was sure Jared would notice—Jared was the type who would—and because he thought of Jared as a person who deserved some privacy, even in the VR.

“I think Brad is fishing for something with the questions. He doesn’t have anything to go on, so he asks questions whenever he can, hoping to get some response. This time, he was lucky. I say keep an eye on him and see what he does with it.”

Jared gave a slight nod. “Thank you. We will keep in touch,” he said to Charles as he stood up. Charles stood as well. The men sitting around the table flickered for a second and blanked, leaving empty chairs. A door opened in the wall behind the table.

“Where’s the surprise?” Charles asked. “The driver mentioned that I would be surprised.”

Jared laughed. “That is next on the agenda.” With his hand, he motioned towards the open door. “After you. Work is waiting.”

Charles squeezed past Jared as he made his way around the table towards the door. Jared had tweaked a bit more than just his clothed appearance. He had also gotten a close look at his eyes. He imagined those eyes closing and the mouth opening, the head coming closer to his. But of course, nothing happened and Jared just looked at him as he slid past. The door closed behind him. Jared hadn’t followed. He found himself alone in an empty hallway, remembering the feel of Jared’s groin on his.

The hall shortened, telescoping in until Charles found himself in a square room. The walls became reflective and the room transformed into a silver-lined elevator showing his own reflection everywhere. As he turned to face the door he had just come through, the floor felt like it dropped out from under him. He caught himself on the wall and breathed deeply to quell his stomach’s climb up his throat.

As quickly as it had started, it stopped. His legs buckled and he found himself on his knees, staring at himself in the floor.

That was a little unsettling, he thought. I do have to give them points for that.

The door opened and he looked up to see Jared waiting for him.

Jared looked down at him. “There will be time enough for that later. Hurry and get up. We can not have you sitting around all day.”

Charles climbed up and exited the elevator. “Taking a few more seconds and slowing down the elevator a bit wouldn’t have hurt anything.”

“Then you would not have gotten a preview of our little surprise,” Jared said, grinning a bit though his eyes didn’t share in the humor. “Come on. Follow me.”

Charles felt like a greyhound following an ass-rabbit around a track. All he could focus on was Jared in front of him. When they had first met, Jared hadn’t been anything notable at all. But after each meeting, Jared would tweak bits of himself until he had gotten to the point where Charles was leashed. Everything that Charles keyed on when looking at a person, Jared was taking advantage of. Regardless of what else this group did, as long as they had Jared, they had him.

They descended down a sloping, non-descript corridor as if the frame had been created too hurriedly to texture before they had gotten there. A single line of lights embedded in the ceiling, guiding them, vanished into the distance. Equally spaced windows gave glimpses of the world outside, the city far below on the horizon.

After a few minutes of silent walking, Charles said, “Where are we going? I don’t see an end to the hall.”

“That’s because it does not have one. We just walk until we get there. It knows where we are going,” Jared said.

“Do you know?”

“I now what to expect, but I do not know where it is in this reality.”

Of course, Jared would know, Charles thought. He had to know. He worked for them. Even with as much as Jared talked, as much as he flirted with Charles, and as much detail as he related, Charles still felt that something was being held back. Why the interest in Brad when Michael was obviously the one to consider? But he was here to do a job, not the one offering the job.

This second part of the encounter was unusual. Usually, they just brought him in, showed him some video, and talked about it. Today, they hadn't even said anything—just showed the recent event and let him talk about it. At least they had confirmed that they were thinking along the same lines he had been, even if they hadn't offered anything more than that. Their interest in Brad puzzled him, but sometimes they were like that—taking interest in things most people wouldn't worry about. It was the short end of the stick that did the work.

“We are going to make an encounter for them to show someone else,” Jared said. “We need you to play a part in it. It will not take too long.” He grinned. This time, his eyes shared in the grin.

“If they can make VRs like this without basing them on reality, I don't see why not,” Charles said.

“How do you know this does not exist somewhere?” Jared said.

“It's too much like the old science fiction movies. The colors, technologies, society. They're all from the old styles.”

“And somewhere, those did not exist. Thus, this can not exist. Perfectly logical in its own way.”

That didn't make any sense, Charles thought. “Imagination can't work without reality?”

“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. A movie director says, ‘Let there be a spaceship,’ and there is a spaceship. Reality is simply a product of the imagination, something realized by the great capitalists of the early information revolution. A simple matter of proper ordering: imagination results in reality, not the other way around.”

“But the VR—what happens in the VR doesn’t affect us in real life,” Charles countered.

“Only in the crudest sense. Evidence collected in the VR is admissible in court. What is done in a court affects someone in real life. How unreal is the work you do in this reality?”

It was true that what he did here and at work did have real life consequences. But to say that it was real put a whole different perspective on it, one that he had been considering but hadn’t accepted yet in all its consequences. What he considered real life—the aspects of flesh and blood, of breath and life—must be separate from the secondary life of the VR. Everything within the VR was a construct, however well controlled, understood, and certified by the state.

“You can’t love in a VR. There are no children. No STDs. No consequences. The memories are there, but they don’t determine what is real and what isn’t,” Charles said. “No different than dreams.”

“Are we having a conversation? Or is this whole sequence only a memory and therefore not real?” Jared asked.

“Dreams are only real when they make themselves manifest in the world through art.”

“Of course,” said Jared. “And the real world only makes itself real in the dream when it makes itself manifest through imagery. But imagery does not have to be solid. The most

powerful medicines these days are not real, but memes put into the minds of people. Those can thrive just as well in this reality as any other.

“I would also remind you that some societies do not wake up in the morning. Instead, they remember what you consider the real world and remind themselves that it is different from where they were. They do not see them as two opposing worlds, but as two alternatives from which they can choose where they live.

“This reality has always been. It has chosen to make itself manifest in this particular way at this particular time for our benefit.”

Charles resolved to walk the rest of the way quiet, sure that he was right but unable to counter anything Jared said. Not that he really wanted to. He felt some measure of comfort in Jared’s sure responses, his knowledge of this reality mixed with what he knew of the real world. Charles didn’t fear being left somewhere, lost and fated to wander the VR until he figured a way out.

After what seemed an eternity, but was probably only a few minutes, Charles piped up. “Are we almost there yet? We’ve been walking for quite some time.”

“The set is almost ready,” Jared said. “A few last minute touches are being made and then we will be there.”

“My feet are starting to hurt.”

“They can not. This is not real. Remember?”

The corridor began taking on a hue, faint enough that it wasn’t clear which one, but it wasn’t white. Outlines of bricks, then stones appeared, and the windows grew taller and narrower. The ceiling became arched. The stone was noticeably pink with bits that sparkled when the light seemed to catch them just right. Torches lighted along the wall as the light

through the windows grew dark from the heavy drizzle that had appeared, causing an even light to be cast across the moor outside.

“Pink granite in England?” asked Charles. “Looks like whoever is in charge here is mixing their visual metaphors.”

“Enough philosophy and petty commentary. This is the set,” Jared said. “Just be yourself.”

They turned the corner and stepped into a pool of light that merged with a larger, boundless gloom. Charles was suddenly aware of the air, heavy with moisture and dank with the smell of people. Small islands of people revolved about a central, raised and well-lighted dais that supported a wooden cross and a rack of tools.

Charles froze. “Whoa. What’s this?”

“Your surprise,” Jared said. “Come on. I will tell you what you need to know as we walk around the set.”

Jared turned to the right and started walking around the perimeter of the space. Charles followed closely so he wouldn’t get lost in the crowds—no telling what would happen to him if he was separated from Jared. He tried to concentrate on Jared as they walked. He kept his hand at his side and tried to let it swing freely and naturally.

“During the video, you will address me as ‘Sir,’ ” Jared began. “You will answer with ‘Sir. Yes, Sir.’ You will not use the first person. You may refer to yourself as ‘slave,’ as I will. Other than that, act naturally and do whatever I tell you.

“Do you understand?” Jared asked.

“I think so,” Charles replied.

“What is that?”

The air in the room suddenly felt warmer and more humid. He felt sweat breaking out on his forehead and tickling as it ran down his sides from under his arms.

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

“Good. You will get the hang of it.”

Charles wanted to take his shirt off, but he wasn't comfortable doing that with so many strangers around, and in this setting. He wasn't part of what everyone else was doing. He wasn't part of what he was seeing. He had never been to a bath house before, or even a dungeon. He had heard of them, of course, but they were always where people went for quick, easy sex and where disease spread. He was clean, providing for his family's future, not looking for a quickie before heading to the office. It wasn't really hot, he thought. This was a virtual reality where everything was just in his head, but the room was becoming stifling and changing to a pair of shorts and a light, thin shirt that breathed better would have been a nice change.

Jared kept talking and the room became increasingly oppressive.

CHAPTER VI

BARBARA BATHES

“Charles was late again,” Barbara said after taking a sip from her margarita.

“Again?” asked Dora as she sat down at the table. “How many times is that now? Five, six? I’m starting to lose count.”

“Enough for us to get another note from the department, I’m sure.”

The margarita was just the thing she needed. Barbara could feel it slide down her throat and spread its warmth from her stomach. One margarita was all she needed to take the edge off the day. After dinner, she’d be able to relax in a hot tub of water, letting the tension flow from her muscles into the water and eventually down the drain to wherever tension went when it was no longer needed. She imagined a field of springs spread out on a fluffy cloud under a deep blue sky, a veritable tension heaven where tension and stress could roam free.

“You would think Charles would be more careful,” Barbara said as she scooped some of the casserole onto her plate. Potatoes, broccoli, some kind of cheese, and a few things she couldn’t identify. “Doesn’t he know that if he screws up, he’s going to take us down with him?”

“I suspect he and Adam might be having some problems,” Dora said. “Charles hasn’t said anything, but Adam said he tried to keep him from leaving early for work.”

“Adam’s adorable,” Barbara said *sotto voce*, glancing down the hall at the closed door to Adam’s room. “But he’s still young. He hasn’t learned to let go yet, to trust that we’ll be here for him at the end of the day.”

“I remember you taking a while to get over your panic attacks when Charles and I weren’t around,” Dora said with a smile, glancing up at Barbara. “It’s been a few years now since you’ve had one. Those memes helping?”

“As much as I dislike the whole memecutical industry, I have to admit that they have.”

Barbara thought back to her glimpses of someone in the crowds on the way home, to the hand on her back, and her stumbling through the apartment building. Dora didn’t need to know about any of those. She would worry about Barbara and mother her. Barbara didn’t mind being mothered in bed. The bedtime stories and the back rubs were wonderful. In other areas of her life, she wanted to stand on her own—with the help of her family, of course, but without the micromanagement that came when someone was worried.

“Anything interesting at work today?” Dora asked. “Anything I should be thinking about for when I go in to the office?”

Barbara knew that the memes had helped her sense of self worth, but the fact that someone thought she needed help made her feel less than whole. She should be able to get by without them. She had been doing well for a while now, almost a week this time, but something today had triggered her, making her unsure of herself. Perhaps it was the symbol in the hand again, or seeing such a resemblance to Charles’ face, or Charles not showing up at the office before she left.

“Barbara?” Dora said, waving her hand in Barbara’s field of vision. “You there?”

“Huh?” said Barbara, coming out of her thoughts.

“I asked if there was anything I needed to be thinking about that was work related.”

“Oh,” Barbara said, looking down at her plate for a second to see what was still there. She hadn’t eaten as much as she thought. Must have been thinking too much.

“There really wasn’t anything in particular. We got a case of a young man that died. A basic locked room scenario that I’m hoping we can figure out fairly quickly with the computer’s help.”

“You know how rare those are,” Dora said. “What makes it seem like a genuine case?”

“No record of anyone else in the room. No forced entry. No struggle. Just a dead person lying on the couch.” Barbara moved some of her casserole around on her plate.

“You can see the video and read the report when you go in.”

“Natural causes?”

“The person was too young for that to be likely, though the coroner’s report should be available for Charles. It hadn’t come back by time I left. Hopefully Charles will see it.” Barbara put down her fork and pushed her plate away. “If he’d come in to the office on time, I could have mentioned all of this to him.”

“That’s why I’m asking,” Dora said. “This way, I can make sure things get taken care of.”

Barbara nodded and pushed away from the table.

“I’m not as hungry as I thought I was,” she said, standing up and taking her plate. “I think I’ll go relax in a hot tub of water for a while and see what else I can come up with.”

She took her plate into the kitchen and emptied it into the garbage disposal.

Dora sat at the table, finishing dinner.

“Want me to tell you a story later?”

“I’d love for you to,” Barbara said, coming back out of the kitchen. “You know I enjoy your company.” She walked over behind Dora, leaned down and hugged her, resting her chin on Dora’s head. “I won’t be too long in the tub. Then you can help me finish out the day on a high note.”

Barbara stood up and went to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

She stood for a moment in the darkness, letting everything about her drink in the world around her, the smell of Adam's damp towel and Charles' aftershave, the cool floor, the clink of the air handler far away in the building. She reached out and, for a few seconds, felt one with the room and the building, a sentinel in the city, a mother to her inhabitants, protecting them from the storms and pollution and strangers who might do them harm. She felt as a Fish should.

Then she came back to herself and turned on the light.

Barbara turned on the taps in the tub and adjusted them until they were a nice, sharp heat like the heat she remembered from the hot springs that her family would visit when she was a child. Her fingers tingled from the rushing blood in their reddening tips. She held the bottle of bubble bath high above the tap and poured a long, thin ribbon, letting it mingle with the water as it ran from the tap. A thick foam began forming and covering the water. A good foam would hold in the heat and make the warm bath last longer. The longer the bath, the more tension could be leached out of her muscles. A hint of lavender wafted up from the water, giving the room a fresh, warm touch.

Barbara reached back and pulled down the zipper on the back of her dress, releasing the pressure around her shoulders. Shrugging them caused the dress sleeves to fall off her shoulders and down her arms. It took only a slight wiggle to loosen things up enough for the dress to slip down and onto the floor. Barbara enjoyed the soft caress of fabric sliding across her skin.

She picked the dress up off the floor and folded it neatly before placing it on the commode seat. No need to wrinkle a perfectly fine dress that could be worn again sometime.

With the virtual reality system, no one actually went to a crime scene and got their hands or clothes dirty.

Barbara gingerly stepped into the water. Her feet tingled from the heat, but she held them in the water knowing that they would acclimate. The water might be hot enough to turn her red as a lobster, but it wasn't hot enough to actually harm her, much less cook her. Her breath eased out as she eased down into the water, feeling the edge of the water creep up her skin.

A hot bath was always relaxing, she thought. A quiet time when she could reflect on the day, floating in the near weightlessness of the water. Her temples were only now beginning their low throb from the induction implants that allowed the VR to function much more realistically than most commercial versions available to the public. As a police investigator, her family had the implants installed as soon as they began working in the position. With a little alcohol, a good meal, and a hot bath, the throbbing would remain just background noise to her day.

Slowly, calmly, she rubbed her temples, making circles with her finger tips. As she closed her eyes, the space between her fingers blossomed until it became her world. The dark space behind her eyes shut out everything else. Scooting down a bit, she immersed as much of her body in the water as she could, resting her head against the wall.

A picture of Luke formed, that lithe form lying on the couch, his arm reaching out to her. His slender wrist and hand turned up, beckoning to her. His fingers, long and slender, curled like the legs of a dead spider on its back. His nails becoming talons. His knobby knuckles the joints of some foreign creature.

She shifted her focus, mentally blinked, and his hand was as she expected: normal. His knuckles were knobby, but only because he was still young and hadn't gained the body

fat of middle age and a slowing metabolism. His arm lengthened, his fingers groping, searching for something.

Barbara parted her legs slightly and pushed forward to meet Luke's hand and let him enter. She arched her back a little in anticipation. She imagined him entering, felt him entering.

Exciting.

It was more than just a bunch of electrons on a wire exciting the VR, running up and down the wire, warming and stretching the insulation, expanding the inner metal. Little waves rippled across the surface of the water, traveling down between her legs to her feet, pushing the tension from her and towards the drain.

Excited electrons copulated with the atoms in the wire, entering and leaving each atom faster than the eye could blink, making their way gloriously to the ends of the world carrying knowledge, which with wisdom constituted the double helix of the memetic underpinning of society. One electron was all that was needed, making its way through all the world, forward and backward in time, knowing everything and yet nothing. Never changing, it could take in and impart nothing.

Barbara thought back to the question she had naïvely asked her physics professor about accelerating an electron, as if an electron was not the electron. Of course, it grew heavier as it grew faster, but it could never become a black hole. A black hole was a black hole regardless of the frame of reference. If an electron was a black hole, then it was always a black hole. And these electrons weren't black holes, especially not hers. They were the one true electron still.

She reached out of the water with one of her glowing red feet and turned the cold tap down, letting the water coming out become hotter. The bubbles were helping the water stay

warm, but she was growing acclimated and it no longer felt hot, even though her pulse was increasing. She relaxed back into the water and let her mind wander again.

Given that its mass was concentrated in a point with no volume (unlike Luke's hand that was not a point, but definitely something that could fill her), it would seem like a black hole (but one which could engorge itself only on information, one of the only dimensionless, massless, things in the universe), but no one had seen the decaying electrons that should result. Hawking had shown before the glorious revolution that the smaller a black hole, the more radiation poured off its surface. Electrons must be the smallest black holes (too small for Luke to want), so they should be the brightest (but not necessarily the smartest – they tended to do as they were told and didn't exercise any free will). Yet none were seen, so the one electron remained an electron and there was no black hole. Or they were bright and hid well.

Luke's hand entered and exited her rhythmically in her mind, those long, thin fingers of a pianist, now dead yet showing her that she was alive, electrifying her as they worked her.

Barbara reached up and turned off the water. It was comfortably filling the tub, but she didn't want to risk it overflowing. She didn't want the tension escaping the tub and dripping through the floor to their downstairs neighbor. He had enough tension of his own. Every once in a while, she could hear him yelling at someone, but couldn't make out what he was yelling about.

The bubbles made a nice insulating layer that hid all but the tips of her breasts and her knees, four islands in a vast, cloudy sea. her pulse quickened more as the heat entered her. She stirred the water, bringing fresh warmth.

Her eyes snapped open in alarm.

She no longer imagined Luke's hand.

She felt it.

Solid.

Touching her, strong, rigid, forceful.

She looked down but saw nothing. The surface of the water was still. She groped beneath the water but could find nothing. Yet it was there.

Then it was gone.

She leaned back, breathing hard, her blood pumping from the adrenaline.

Breath in, slowly, she thought.

Then breath out.

Counting to five on each inhalation and exhalation, she tried to bring her body under control, to calm her pounding pulse. She felt someone (definitely a "him") below her, enveloping her in his arms. She tried to get up, out of the warmth of the water and his embrace, but could only splash. She tried to scream and her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"Do not be afraid," a voice whispered in her ear. "It is only me."

"Who are you?" she asked, afraid to turn around and look. Afraid she would see Luke's dead eyes staring back at her in the distance, blind. The heat of his breath was on her ear.

"I am Luke. I am all the men and women you have ever wanted, but did not have. I saw how you looked at me."

"But who are you?" she whispered. "What do you want?"

Luke sighed. "The two most important questions ever asked," he said. "Do you truly think I would be satisfied with what I want? And if I got what I want, do you not think

I would find something else to want?” His voice flowed smoothly through the humid air with assuring confidence. “No. What I want is not what I am here about.” He laughed. “But you asked me who I am.

“I am the mover of worlds and the shaker of minds,” he droned. “I count the unsettled among my priests.”

His voice rose slightly.

“I see the world tree lifted high into the heavens and its talons clawing the earth. Its trunk crawls with the dark imaginings of a lost humanity. It pulses with a tantalized emptiness and finds no satisfaction.

“But I have found you.”

She felt him throb below her.

“And I will have satisfaction.”

“But Luke’s dead,” she said, trying to keep a grip on the reassuring solidity of the tub. “You can’t be Luke.”

“Luke is,” he began, pausing for a bit as if searching for the right word. “Let us just say that Luke is elsewhere at the moment, and I am here to take you to him.

“But rest assured that I am Luke. I know him intimately, better than you ever will with your searches and investigations. Better than Mark ever did with their arguments and nights as passionate as they were. And what is the difference between me and someone else if I know everything there is to know about them? More even than they know about themselves? Existence is information. I know everything. And I desire to know you.”

“You don’t have to do this to know me,” Barbara spat out through clenched teeth. Her breathing was becoming more ragged, affected by the heat of the water and the vapor.

Luke became more insistent.

“I must know you as I have known Luke and all of the others,” he said. “It is a lot easier if you just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

Barbara opened her eyes but saw nothing.

No water.

No tub.

Just the emptiness that comes when there is nothing seen.

The warmth of Luke enveloped her, filled her, invaded every space within her. Despite all the clenched muscles and closed passageways, Luke found his way into her and knew her. He learned all her innermost desires and thoughts. No corner was neglected, no nerve not stimulated. In a last, ecstatic, orgasmic flash of nerve impulses, she arched her back in surprise as he came to know her as he knew Luke.

CHAPTER VII

CHARLES'S SURPRISE

Charles followed Jared around the edge of the room that served as a set for the video they were to produce. Through the increasingly hazy air, Charles could make out a cross standing on a dais in the center of the room off to his left. Light splashed around it from a spotlight hidden in the dark recesses of the ceiling. No one was near the cross though small groups of people milled around the area. Everyone kept clear of the center of the room and the dais.

As they walked, they passed a cage set up against the wall. It was tall and narrow, just large enough for a person to stand. Suspended from the top of the cage was what looked like a metal diving helmet, but without any way to see out, from which a neck extended through a leather collar, connected to the naked, hairless body of a young man. Tied to the collar was a leather strap that ran down his back to his wrists which were securely held up against his back just below his shoulder blades. His feet were spread and bound to the sides of the cage with a pair of black, leather bindings.

"He doesn't look very comfortable," Charles said.

"Why should he?" Jared asked. "He is a prop for the video. He provides atmosphere."

Even though Charles thought he should feel free to leave his inhibitions and worries behind—after all, nothing that happened here affected anyone in reality—something still nagged at him. One of the benefits of using the VR for their work was that they stayed out of harm's way. They might have to go into a burning building, or a partially collapsed house to see what might have happened. They might live through countless days of getting trapped somewhere, having something explode near them, or fall down a hole. While there

would be a momentary flash of pain, a pressure where there should be none, the VR quickly cut out and placed them somewhere safe. At the end of the day, they left the VR and went home to their family, to a warm meal on the table and cool sheets on the bed. Someone could hang from a metal helmet all day in the VR and not have a cramp when they left.

Even after all the years in the department, his body still responded to what he saw. It couldn't tell the difference between the various realities when they all looked and felt the same. He hadn't grown up with the VR. The younger generation today, such as Adam, had that advantage. They didn't know a time when they couldn't suit up and instantly be transported into another world.

In this other world, he was finding himself uneasy. They were walking past one display after another of people in various states of undress, tied down, tied up, hanging sideways or upside down. Various implements that he had only dreamed of stuck in various places. Some were tied to boards, others to someone else, some to nothing at all. All of them people in physical distress. All of them props for whatever Jared had in mind.

Half way around the room, they came to a large, white-enameled iron tub standing off the ground on feet covered in fancy scroll work. Lying in the tub was a woman, tanned and with the occasional dark spot that came with age. She had the leanness of someone who took care of herself. Charles could see a young man lying below her. Her head was lying on his shoulder while he whispered in her ear, cradling her body on his. His hands with their long fingers played up and down her torso, stimulating her. Her breathing was shallow and rapid.

Jared stopped and let Charles watch the display for a while. The young man's brilliant blue eyes seemed to complement well the woman's piercing green—at least those few times she opened her eyes and Charles could see them. The young man looked up at Charles and

grinned, revealing canine teeth that had been filed to a sharp point. He flicked his tongue across his lips.

“I will know you,” he said, looking into Charles’s eyes. “I will have satisfaction.”

Charles started a bit and the young man was back to caressing the woman. He was whispering again into her ear as if nothing had happened.

“Did you see that?” Charles asked Jared as they moved on.

“See what?”

“His teeth,” Charles said. “And he looked right at me and talked, as if he were a real person.”

“I did not see anything. But you might have seen something different if the VR wanted you to see something else.” Jared quickened his step. “Remember, I am not controlling this scene.”

Charles hurried to keep up. It seemed as if they were leaving the tub scene as quickly as they could without raising any suspicions.

“What do you know?” Charles said under his breath.

“Nothing I should say anything about. If you did see what you mentioned, then we need to hurry. They might already be recording.

“If they are recording, then we need to be in character. Do you remember your line?”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

Jared smiled. “Good, slave.”

They continued around the room until they had returned to the entrance.

“It is time,” Jared said. “From here, I will be telling you everything you need to do.

“First, get rid of those clothes. You will not need them for what we will be doing.”

He waved at Charles's clothes and they disappeared, leaving him exposed and surprisingly more comfortable, though a bit self-conscious, in the heavy air of the room.

"Next, you need something reasonable, something inviting."

He waved again and Charles found himself wearing a leather codpiece that made him look to be a bit more than he was. Black leather chaps covered his legs. Heavy, black boots made his feet feel like they were stuck to the ground. Nothing covered his chest.

Jared removed his own clothes in the same way, replacing them with wrist and ankle restraints. Around his neck was a collar with a ring at his throat and at the back of his neck. He didn't wear anything else.

Charles had all he had wanted. He saw Jared bare, exposed. Jared was everything he had expected, his ass a perfect bubble, his skin glistening in the gravid atmosphere. His muscles rippled across his lean frame. But this wasn't how he had wanted the discovery to happen. This had the feeling of being in public, around other people even if they might only be props created by the VR for the benefit of the video. Charles didn't feel anything private or special about this.

"Lead me to the dais," Jared said.

Charles latched his finger through the ring on the front of Jared's collar and walked to the dais. Jared held back just enough to create tension in Charles's arm. Charles didn't feel too eager about playing his part and figured that Jared was helping him by acting reluctant.

As Charles stepped onto the dais with Jared, the groups of people milling about stopped their milling and turned to face them. Slowly, they spread out and formed a circle surrounding the dais. Charles turned himself completely around looking for an opening, but he couldn't see any clear place through which he could run, as if he could run from the

VR while within it. Everyone stood shoulder to shoulder, silently watching them as they approached the cross.

Nobody moved.

Nobody made a sound.

All attention was focused on him.

Jared moved over to the cross and stood with his arms out, facing Charles and leaning back against it.

“Tie me down,” he said.

Charles cringed at the sound of Jared’s voice. It was a pleasant voice. He enjoyed the sound, but in any other place it wouldn’t have been as loud. In this quiet space, it was louder than it needed to be. He was all too aware of the circle of people watching and listening. Aware that what Jared said, he said not only for Charles, but for them.

“Sir. Yes, sir,” Charles responded, almost automatically. The ease with which he fell into this role surprised him.

This reversal of roles seemed strange to him, but if this was what was needed to make this video work, and thus help his family, then this was what he would do, though how this might help was beyond him. Perhaps the committee was testing his devotion to his family. He hoped so. Otherwise, he could think of a million better places to be, even with Jared.

Especially with Jared.

Charles took each of the leather wrist restraints and fastened them above Jared on each of the upper arms of the cross, pulling on the ends of the straps to make sure they were snug. Blue veins sank into Jared’s arms as the blood drained out, making narrow furrows. Charles lightly traced them with his fingers down to the elbows where they disappeared beneath the muscle.

Jared had outdone himself this time, Charles thought. He had made the perfect model to catch his attention. This was what had caught his eye the first time he had seen Adam a couple of years before. The exquisitely smooth skin and shading of the tan. The fine hair that covered his arms, barely visible to the eye and invisible to the touch. The body of a young man who has entered adulthood but has yet to endure the ego-death of middle age that comes to such beautiful people if they never find meaning outside of their own bodies. Charles hoped he was providing a way for Adam to avoid becoming a bitter old queen.

Charles continued down the arms and onto the chest. Raising the arms had made it easier to see Jared's ribs and caused his stomach to sink in a bit, making him appear thinner. He was obviously older than Adam, but if they were the same age, Charles would have sworn they could have been brothers.

He let his hand fall off of Jared's chest and lowered himself until he was balancing on the balls of his feet, hunched over, holding on to Jared's ankles to steady himself. The feet had high arches. Charles could never watch someone walk without arches. He knew it didn't hurt and knew it didn't make the person undesirable, but the thought of walking without arches made him shudder.

He swung one of the legs over and fastened it to the cross. Swinging the other leg required knocking it out from under Jared, making him hang from the wrist restraints until the leg was fastened onto the cross and he could put his weight back on it. With his legs fastened to the cross, he was lowered by at least a good six inches, causing his arms to pull taught.

Charles stood back up. He looked down at Jared's face and into his eyes.

Jared looked back.

"Now bind my waist and legs to the frame."

Charles peered around Jared at the cross frame and noticed some black straps hanging from the center section as well as part way down each of the lower legs. He cinched them tight around Jared's waist and thighs, holding his groin steady, stable, immobile as a rock. A firm foundation framed by black leather. The focus of the evening's entertainment. Everything above and below could be removed and nothing might be lost.

Charles stood up but stroked the cock in admiration and desire. It responded and bounced with Jared's heartbeat. He looked down at Jared's face, waiting to hear what he should do next.

"Now you will kiss me, forcing your way in, demonstrating your dominance of me."

If this were Adam before him, Charles would gladly have done so. If this had been Jared somewhere alone without the audience watching, he would gladly have done so as well. In either case, he would need no encouraging. He would have done so without a word needing to be said. But this was before an audience—not only the audience that he could see surrounding them, but who knew what audience might watch whatever video was being made of this.

He leaned forward a bit, keeping his hand on Jared's cock, and tentatively kissed him.

Jared leaned back and whispered, "Try to break my neck. That should give them the right image."

As satisfying as this might be for Jared, Charles felt nothing but fear and revulsion, not because he didn't like looking at Jared, but because he didn't enjoy hurting anyone. He was a detective because he wanted to help people, not because of any power it might give him.

He moved forward anyway, dropping Jared's cock and putting his arms around him, grabbing hold of the frame as if it were his objective. If he was to dominate, he would

make sure there could be no question of his dominance. Jared would have to be part of the furniture—just another prop—if he was to make this believable. He pushed his mouth onto Jared, taking advantage of his leverage to push Jared’s head back, bending his neck as far as he could. Jared didn’t offer any of the resistance that Charles yearned for—that would let Charles know he had gone far enough.

He pressed forward, forcing Jared’s lips apart. Charles could feel the muscles in Jared’s face as he smiled. He opened himself up and let Charles explore his mouth.

Charles tasted nothing. No breakfast or lunch. No minty freshness from a recent brushing. Nothing. He felt the hard ridges of teeth and the inquisitive advances of Jared’s tongue, but that was all.

He closed his eyes and let himself go. He could enjoy this, at least for the moment and if he forgot about all the people around him. If he ignored the world and thought only of his own desires, he could enjoy it.

But he couldn’t.

His impulses couldn’t get beyond faint reminders of what he felt when he was with Adam. He could feel Jared rigid against his belly, responding to the kiss with adolescent enthusiasm.

Jared mumbled.

Charles couldn’t make out what it might be since his tongue was gagging Jared. He removed his tongue and pulled his head back enough to give Jared room to speak.

“Get on your knees and take my testicles into your mouth,” Jared said. “Do not worry, it will be large enough to accommodate.”

Charles backed away a bit. Jared brought his head up and watched as he knelt down. He paused a bit, unsure of how to take both in. It wasn’t as if he’d never done this with

Adam, but Adam was younger and smaller, easier to work with. Adam also waxed, whereas Jared apparently chose not to, at least in how he appeared here. Hair wasn't something Charles liked.

"Go on," Jared said. "It is not that hard. If you have to, take one at a time."

Charles tentatively took them in, surprised at how wide he was able to open his mouth. They fit perfectly, as Jared had said they would. He had just enough room to move his tongue over their surface, especially towards the base beneath. The hair felt odd, moving beneath his tongue, clinging to it, holding on to his spit. He could feel Jared tightening the muscles in his legs as he clenched and unclenched his ass in response to the stimulation. Despite Jared's best efforts, nothing moved in his framed groin that Charles himself didn't move.

"That is good," Jared said.

Charles looked up at Jared while continuing to run his tongue over his skin, the obedient slave waiting for Jared to tell him what he should do next.

A low, expectant moan rose up all around him while he knelt and held Jared's masculinity in his mouth. He glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw some of the people watching intently, as if entranced, swaying gently against each other.

"Imagine biting into a juicy steak," Jared said down to him. "Now, bite as hard as you can."

Charles paused in surprise. Playing the dominant had been difficult enough for him. Now he had to actually cause harm, even if it was just in the virtual reality they were in. This was no longer a sexual game that could have been played out somewhere else. Adam could no longer be any part of this for him. If he were to go through with this, if he were

willing to push his boundaries beyond those of his family, he knew his family would never again be able to satisfy him.

“You forget that this is not real,” Jared said. “We will see each other again, even after all of this.”

He didn’t want to do this. He wanted to find pleasure in the evening with Adam and Barbara. He wanted to know that everything he needed, he could find in them and Dora.

He shook his head from side to side to let Jared know that he didn’t want to.

“Think of your family,” Jared said.

Charles was thinking of his family. Even though his stomach churned at the thought of what Jared was asking him to do, he bit down. He channeled every bit of rage he felt at being made to do this as he put all the strength he had into the bite so it could hopefully be quick.

It wasn’t.

It was like biting into a juicy steak, as Jared had said. It was as tough as a piece of meat that hadn’t yet been cooked. There was gristle. There was the taste and smell of iron. Something warm and fluid ran down his chin, tickling him.

The moan of the surrounding crowd rose in energy, as if eager to see him finish.

Jared grunted.

“Grind your teeth back and forth a bit,” he said through clenched teeth. “That will get through the tough parts.”

At this point, there was no turning back. Charles pulled his head down to draw the sack away from the body and ground his teeth, working his jaw back and forth to try and saw through the bits that hadn’t yielded to simple pressure. The smell of blood filled his

nostrils. The feeling of abandonment filled him with lust. He was a wild animal tearing its food from a carcass.

Finally, he bit through and fell back.

The audience fell silent.

Charles spat out everything in his mouth and stood up. He fished a hair from between his teeth and threw it away. His face flushed with anger, matching the bright crimson surrounding his mouth and dripping onto his chest. His palms hurt from the nails digging in.

“Do not say a word,” Jared said before Charles could say anything. “Remain in character.”

Charles leaned in to let Jared see close up what he looked like, what he smelled like. Jared pulled back and wrinkled his nose.

Charles threw his weight forward, pushing his way into Jared’s mouth, forcing him to taste his own blood that was now flowing freely between his legs, that was even now seeping through the codpiece and covering Charles’s rampant cock.

“All I wanted was your ass,” Charles said. “I’ve done everything you ever asked me to do. Everything your blasted committee asked me to do. And *this*,” he waved his hand at the wilting, ruined figure of Jared, “is how you reward me.”

Charles turned to the crowd surrounding the dais and looked at them. Idiots, he thought. They were all idiots.

“He’s yours,” he said as he walked off the dais.

The crowd moved aside to allow him through. Behind him, he could hear them already mounting the dais and taking Jared off the cross. What they wanted with Jared, he didn’t

want to know. Without looking back, he walked towards the entrance of the room, and then through it into a brightly lit corridor.

No one was there to meet him.

The corridor pixelated, became uncertain, and began fading. He felt himself fading as well, changing from the bloodied person who had walked off the dais and back into the older man who had walked through the darkened corridors on the way to the meeting room.

Once the world stabilized around him, he found himself standing in the family's office. The VR equipment stood around him. No one else was there.

The computer was locked.

He reached down and touched the growing wet spot on the front of his pants.

CHAPTER VIII

BARBARA'S DISCOVERED

Dora knocked on the door to the bathroom. "You okay, Barbara?" she called out in a hushed tone as not to wake Adam. "You've been in there for a while now."

Barbara did like to take long baths, Dora thought, but this was longer than usual. The water had been off for a while and no sounds were coming from the bathroom.

No stirring of the water or splashing.

No humming to herself.

Nothing.

Dora knocked on the door again. "Say something, dear. Let me know you're okay."

Nothing.

She tried the door handle. It was locked. Again, something unusual. Barbara never locked the door. They all knew each other intimately. They had nothing to hide. A locked door to a silent room with someone on the other side could mean nothing but trouble.

This time, she banged on the door and wiggled the door handle back and forth. She didn't yell too loudly, but she was less concerned about waking Adam now than she was finding out what might be wrong with Barbara.

"Open up, Barbara," she pleaded. "Please." Her throat constricted in desperation. "Let me know there's nothing wrong." She banged one more time and then turned away from the silence.

There was a small, flat screwdriver in the tool chest under the sink in the kitchen that she could use to unlock the door if she had to. It could fit in the hole in the door handle outside the bathroom and unlock it. A few minutes later, she was back with it and stuck

it in the door handle. After searching with the screwdriver a bit, she found the lock and turned it. The door handle turned freely. She opened the door and walked in.

Dora could hear Adam running from his room after she screamed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Dora looked back and saw him looking past her.

“Oh, God,” he said.

He put his hands on her shoulder. She reached up and took one of his in hers. For a while, they looked at Barbara lying in the tub, mostly submerged but with her breasts, knees, and belly sticking up out of the water. Whatever had happened had happened quietly without a struggle. Her legs were relaxed and her head was just above the water. Her eyes were open and staring into the distance, past the wall, out of the apartment, out of the city into the wild no man’s land.

No steam rose from the water. The bubbles had collapsed.

“She looks happy,” Dora whispered. Adam nodded his head behind her and squeezed her shoulder.

“Should we call the department?” Adam asked.

“Charles should be in the office,” Dora said. “We can call him.”

Adam went back to his room and called the office on his phone.

Dora kept looking at Barbara. She knelt down and brushed the hair out of Barbara’s eyes before closing them. She sat on the edge of the tub and looked at her.

“I know we sometimes identify with the victim,” Dora said softly. “But you didn’t have to go and imitate the one from today.” She laughed a bit and fought back her tears.

One escaped.

Someone had to be strong in this family now. Adam was too young and still a bit of an unknown, even though they had accepted him into the family. Charles was becoming undependable with his work.

“He’s not in the office yet,” Adam said returning from his room. “But the receptionist is notifying the department. They’ll be sending a team over as soon as possible.”

Dora took a deep breath before standing up. She turned and looked at Adam.

“Better get some clothes on then,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe they’ll give me a larger avatar.” He grinned.

“Size queen.” Dora chuckled. “Now why did you go and make me laugh?”

“Better than crying,” he said. “We don’t have much time anyway.”

A few minutes later, Dora could hear the sounds of the department team setting up the virtual reality presence equipment at their apartment door. It wasn’t loud. There were a few snicks. A few snaps. A slight hum. Small sounds that were telltale to them because they were familiar with the procedures. Finally, the knock on the door.

Dora opened the door and saw the technicians in their full body suits—the ones that hid them from everyone, that if compromised by someone would sentence that someone to solitary confinement for life. There was no death sentence. Being locked away with no sense of place or time was much more humane than death because there was always the hope that the sentence might be commuted through some mercy of the Muses. These same suits allowed everyone at the department to lead public lives and yet never be known. She allowed these men in suits to enter their apartment. These were people she knew, that she worked with every day, and yet neither would know the other here.

“She’s here in the bathtub,” Dora said, leading the suit with the medical kit to Barbara. No doubt a photographer was close behind in the VR recording important parts of the scene.

The medic took various instruments from its kit and poked Barbara, prodded her in a few places, and felt for her pulse on her neck and wrist. After taking a few blood samples, checking her eyes, and making sure the VR photographer had taken all the right pictures, it stood up and turned to Dora.

“She is dead,” it said. “Her body is still firm, but not rigid, so she has not been dead too long. The water has helped keep her from cooling down too quickly.”

Dora nodded in understanding.

“We will need to take her to the department pending the outcome of the investigation.”

The suit motioned everyone out of the bathroom.

Dora turned and looked into Adam’s eyes, but they were distant and accepting, though disconnected. He must know what was happening, she thought, but not yet realized what was happening. Until he immersed himself in Barbara’s death and let it pass through and beyond him, his world would still have a living Barbara to be forgotten, and a dead Barbara to be remembered.

“Come on, Adam,” Dora said, putting her arm around him and gently pushing him from the bathroom. “We need to give them room to move her.”

They shuffled out into the living room and sat off in a corner to give the suits a wide berth.

A second team of suits trundled through with a stretcher and went to the bathroom. A lone suit with a blue stripe across its torso followed. That would be the principal investigator. Dora had never realized just how anonymizing all of the suits were, an ant hill of activity with all of the identical, indistinguishable suits running around doing whatever they did, except for the one with the blue stripe.

That wasn’t Charles.

He hadn't been in the office when they called. She wasn't sure they would have sent Charles if he had been in. Doing so would have broken the objectivity of any subsequent investigation.

Dora could hear them draining the water from the tub and the occasional drip from Barbara as they pulled her out of the tub to place her on the stretcher. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, letting the waves of emotion wash over and through her, letting each drop reverberate, filling her and then ebbing, taking her grief with them as if they were her tears hidden from Adam.

The principal investigator followed the stretcher out of the bathroom and into the living room. Adam stood up and went over to look at Barbara.

"She's looking pretty good," he said. "Probably surprised. Once she gets over it, she'll be okay."

Dora went over and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder to look over at Barbara. "She's dead, dear. She's not getting over it."

"Nonsense. Barbara's not the type of woman to let something like death get in her way," he said. He bent down and kissed Barbara on the forehead.

He turned to Dora. "You going to be all right?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions before I leave," the principal investigator in the blue stripe said to both of them.

"Of course," said Dora.

They recounted the evening's events. Barbara had come home after Adam had gone to bed. Dora had fixed dinner and eaten with Barbara. Barbara had gone into the bathroom to take a bath before heading to bed. Dora had read a book while waiting for Barbara. Adam had been asleep the entire time until Dora had discovered Barbara.

Dora hadn't heard anything unusual from the bathroom while Barbara was in it, but somehow the door had become locked. The family never locked their doors. They respected each other's privacy enough not to need locks.

As far as her medical history went, Barbara had been seeing a memecist for her paranoid panic attacks and depression, but she had been showing remarkable improvement since going. Dora thought that she seemed well balanced and engaged in her work and family life.

Dora felt Adam's silent presence beside her, giving her the strength she needed to answer the questions from the sightless, featureless plasticized face of the principal investigator. Not only had she never realized the extent of the anonymity, but she hadn't realized how disturbing such a face could be when trying to carry on a conversation. There was no body language. No facial expression. No humanity in or behind that mask. This was the ultimate objectivity in all its cold and exacting perfection. There was no common ground on which to build any kind of relationship, no matter how transient it might be.

Dora was glad to see the principal investigator leave. She could hear the team tearing down the virtual reality equipment on the other side of their closed apartment door. She wondered what the neighbors might be thinking, but let that thought slip from her mind when she turned around and looked at Adam standing in the middle of the living room, watching her. She leaned back against the door and braced herself before pushing off and walking over to him.

"Are you going to be okay?" Dora asked.

He nodded.

He was the fragile one in the family, Dora thought. If anyone was going to freak out because of Barbara, it would be Adam. They just needed to wait until the department

figured out why she had died and they would be able to move on. Losing a family member was always hard, but life continued. They would find a fourth to take her place. They would be able to enjoy dating again. It had been a while since she had gone out for a night on the town.

It would be interesting to see how Adam took it since he wasn't the type to have much of an opinion on women, at least for a relationship. This would be an opportunity for her to learn more about Adam and what he wanted from her family.

"Relax," Dora said. "Everything will be okay." She looked around for her wallet. "I'm going to head to the office and see if I can dig up the investigative reports. Charles should be here in a few hours. Think you'll be okay until he gets here?"

Adam looked a little sullen. "I think so," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Charles had to leave early as well."

"But Barbara said he wasn't even at the office yet when she left." Dora put her wallet in her pants. "I'll chat with him when I see him."

"I can't persuade you to wait a few hours, can I?"

"I'm afraid I need to find them now before they get buried in the system," Dora said. "But I'll give you a call when I get to the office."

Adam nodded and walked towards the door as she let herself out.

She closed the apartment door behind her and righted the fallen eight. She stood there for a few seconds before walking down the hall. She could hear the clicks of the locks behind her as Adam prepared to head back to bed. No other noise came from the apartment. No sound of Adam finally letting go of his self-control.

There must be something that Adam knew that she didn't. She knew where he was from, but not why he was in her family. Once this was settled, she would need to confront him. But not now. At least he should be safe until Charles got home from work.

The yellowing of the walls and the lights hanging from their wires always bothered Dora. The family couldn't afford anything better, but Dora was planning on changing that someday. She had a small stash of cash on the side that could be a down payment on a house in a few years, though with the continued downward spiral of property values, it might not even be that long. That was assuming everyone else waiting for prices to stabilize didn't jump into the market all at the same time. Regardless, prices shouldn't be much higher than they were now when she had enough in her cache to let them move.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to run to the nearest wall and beat her head against it until her skull split open and all the ache could spill out. She wanted to pound it with her fists to beat back the world. But none of that would bring Barbara back.

Instead, she walked down the hall, down the stairs, and out through the heavy metal door onto the sidewalk.

The street lights were on, casting a yellowish glow on everything around her. Faint wisps of steam rose from the grates into the cooling air. If she looked down one of the long streets, she could see the last rays of sunlight lighting up the tops of distant thunderclouds whose bases disappeared against the dark sky, as if they grew out of the distant earth itself, giants overseeing the world below. Above her, the first stars were coming out.

She made her way through the nearly deserted streets to the subway station and walked down its steps, each one reminding her of what Barbara might have seen that morning on the way to the office or that evening on the way home. Who knows how many lives she would have touched going to and from the office. The little shops. The people on the

subway. In a city as dense as this one, it was bound to be quite a few. Most of them would never know her.

Dora had known her and was happy for it, even if she would miss her. Barbara had been special. A lost soul that she and Charles had found and brought in to their family.

After years of living with her predecessors in the family and then Charles, she had finally found someone with whom she could bond. Someone who could understand her. And now this person was dead.

The subway station was empty except for employees and a few people waiting for the next train. The sweeper was taking the lull as an opportunity to walk through the station picking up any stray trash that might have been left by an inconsiderate traveler. Even with the harmony encouraged by the Muses, not everyone was aware that their actions sometimes degraded the world for others. It was an opportunity for someone else to contribute to society.

Dora couldn't imagine being a sweeper. Being someone who walked the platform day after day picking up trash and sweeping up the dirt left by everyone else. No one noticed a clean station. No one noticed when you did your job well. Everyone noticed when there was no sweeper. You could only gain the attention of your superiors by not doing your job. How thankless that must be. She was glad she could help people and make a good, noticeable name for her family.

They would have to work a bit harder with Barbara gone. Perhaps double up on some shifts since there were only three now. The department might let them leave the office unoccupied for some weekends to let them catch up on their rest. A tired mind did not make good deductions. Such a mind could miss important details. The whole case could grow cold before they would be able to make any headway at all. But with some rest and

time to find a fourth member, the family would survive and the city would benefit from their abilities.

Dora stood behind an older teenage boy waiting in line for the train. She thought it unusual that he should be out this late with school the next morning, but she wasn't his mother and she wasn't the police.

He tapped his foot nervously and impatiently. He twirled the string hanging off the sleeve of his white, faux fur jacket.

The jacket fit him well, complementing his jet black shoulder-length hair.

She would speak with Charles about the time they would need to keep sharp and find another member for the family. They needed to sit down and have a good talk anyway, there was so much to talk about now with Barbara gone and Adam.

Adam was having issues. He seemed to feel that he wasn't worth their worry, time, and love. She wasn't sure why he felt that way, but it probably was due to his youth. He had only been in one other relationship before this family, and it had ended dramatically and poorly for him. He had tried to make a go at a duo even though it was frowned on by everyone. When the relationship had run into trouble, he hadn't had anyone he could depend on, so it fell apart. But now in this family, they all had each other. Even if there were problems, there was always someone else to turn to. She would talk to Charles about spending more time with Adam.

The train pulled up to the platform and the door opened.

The teenager in front of her rushed on without waiting for anyone to get off.

She waited.

No one appeared to be getting off, so she walked on and chose a seat towards the front where she could look out of the window and see the city when the train left its underground

tracks. She wouldn't see most of the platforms. She wouldn't have to see many people. She could concentrate on the nebulous city sans inhabitants, sans Barbara, for a while.

The train pulled out of the station, the seat pushing her forward as the train accelerated, as if a hand were pushing her down the tracks. She settled back into the seat and laid her head against the glass of the window, watching the lights silently flash by faster and faster.

The sway of the train and the beat of the track was comforting, as if she were in a womb protected from everything around her. She raised her knees up and put her arms around them. Her hands rested on the edge of her seat.

In the solitude that only comes from being alone in a crowd, Dora felt the pressure of being strong melt away. She felt her muscles relaxing. Her breathing became easier. Tears finally began to well up and run down her cheeks.

She could see Barbara on the train heading to the office, surrounded by people she'd never know, watching them and them watching her. She would have looked out the window and seen the lights flashing by, seen the city laid out. Day after day, she would have seen the city transform as it grew, growing with it. The changes would have been so slight each day that neither noticed the other until the seasons would come back around and each would remember what might have been the year before. The city wouldn't stop because someone no longer lived in it. While it did depend on everyone, it didn't depend on anyone in particular. No one was that valuable. Barbara's value was because of her place with her family, not her place in the city. The city wouldn't miss her. Her family would.

Dora knew that she would be okay. She just needed some time alone, away from Adam and Charles. Away from the apartment and the bathroom that would remind her of Barbara. Away from the office and Barbara's notes. She'd have to go in to the office eventually because there was work to do. And she'd eventually have to go home to the apartment

because there were Adam and Charles to be with. But for a few hours, she wanted to be alone, on the train, with only her memories and thoughts of Barbara for company.

She had planned on telling Barbara a story after the bath but hadn't had a chance. This would be as good a time as any to tell a story to the memory of Barbara. Perhaps that could bring some rest. The train continued and Dora rode it to the end of the line and back again until it was time to go to the office, all the while telling herself stories for and about Barbara.

CHAPTER IX

CHARLES LEARNS BARBARA'S DEAD

Charles stood in the family's office, aware of the growing stain on the front of his pants.

He wasn't sure how he got there after each session that he spent in the virtual reality system working with the committee, but somehow, when he came out of the VR, he was. He had searched every panel and corner of the office but had never found anything that indicated an access point. As soon as he left the room, even for a brief moment, the equipment would vanish as if into thin air. He wasn't sure how they did it, but he didn't believe in magic. He just had to take his time, as was his practice in any detective work, and catch them making a mistake, assuming there was a next time. After walking out on that horrid scene with Jared, he wasn't sure he'd have a next time.

He rubbed his temples in a habit that had come from years of working with the VR for the department. The occasional headache near the implants still plagued him.

He needed to catch up on what Barbara had left, but first he had to contain the squishy feeling in his pants.

Charles opened the door of the office and looked out into the hall to see if anyone was around.

It was empty.

If he could make it to the bathroom without incident, then everything would probably be okay.

On any other day, the office would be one of the most asexual places for him. Today, not only had he had an orgasm at work, but he had had one that was going to be hard to

cover up. Anyone walking by him would see the stain. Anyone too close would catch a whiff and, unless they had no experience at all (which was unlikely in this department), would know immediately that something was out of place, at least with him.

Fortunately, he made it without incident.

In one of the stalls, he opened his pants and peeled away his underwear, sending up a wave of soft saltiness and revealing a sticky mass of hair and ejaculate surrounding his cock. It oozed down around his balls. Exposed to the air, it was quickly cooling. It felt as if someone had taken a cold, damp washcloth and stuck it down his pants.

He tore off a length of toilet paper and began wiping it off, starting with his balls and working up towards his belly. He threw it into the toilet and grabbed more, continuing until he got every bit that he could. His hair around his cock would have a little more body until he could take a shower after work, but the smell should be slight, and there wouldn't be any noticeable spot on his pants.

Back in the office, he sat down at the computer and unlocked it. Barbara had left her usual collection of folders and documents open on the desktop, letting him know what she had been working on at the end of her shift.

He read through the priority e-mail flagged since the beginning of his shift, catching up with the rest of the family. It consisted of the usual case work, new information coming in from sources, possible evidence found.

There was an e-mailed status report from the integrator Barbara had started before she left, but he couldn't find it running on the desktop.

Integrators had taken the drudgery out of detective work. They could sift through billions of seemingly unrelated facts and draw lines between people, places, events, ideas. They could draw on all of the information in the world's databases, metabases, and archives.

They came with the most advanced inference engines ever. They made Sherlock seem pitiable and heroic for having put up with such primitive conditions as he had, yet do as well as he did. Integrators were the Watsons of the modern era.

This particular integrator had sent an e-mail letting the family know that it had found a few interesting connections but hadn't given up yet. Indefatigable and backed by the department's budget, it would not stop until it had exhausted every possible inference and checked every database, metabase, and archive connected to the net, no matter how tenuously connected or how strongly protected. Only a direct command from the family would stop it.

After searching through everything he could find on the desktop, Charles finally found the agent's display. He looked over the results it had found for the five people Barbara had given it. A few items crossed over two or three of them, but four of the five had drunk a glass of sherry two nights before their death. Not just any sherry, but the same recent import distributed as part of the new awakening by the Muses as they slowly opened up society after their long self-imposed isolationism. The fifth hadn't had any of the sherry but had kissed someone who had. No need to tell the surviving family about that affair. Two thousand three hundred fourteen others had drunk the same sherry. Seven thousand four hundred ninety one had direct contact with those 2,314. Twenty five thousand five hundred two had direct contact with those 7,491. All of these had been without any incident. These five were countered by 35,307 seemingly alive people. Whatever had killed them probably wasn't in the sherry.

All five had been taken to St. Messien's Home for the End of Time, billed as the only place where you could live and not have to leave when you died. Charles had heard of it, a place where people could live in retirement with an integrated hospital, hospice, assisted

living, chapel, and mausoleum (no cemetery), but he had never been there. A post-cubicle community for those who didn't have a complete family to care for them.

The fact that all five were at St. Messien's had come from the Home's records, not those of the department. The computer didn't know where in the Home they were. No detail other than that the dead were in the chapel, mausoleum, or morgue.

The computer beeped, bringing Charles out of his reverie. A new message, sent by Adam from his computer at home, appeared on the screen.

Charles sighed to himself, wondering what excuse Adam would have this time. The boy really needed to grow up. He didn't remember acting this insecure when he was Adam's age.

He told the integrator to discard the sherry but follow up on the Home and see what else it could dig up. He opened Adam's e-mail to see what he wanted.

"Barbara's dead," it began.

Charles didn't read further. He just stared at the screen, at those two simple words.

His chest felt hollow.

He forced himself to breath.

After months of working with the committee, running late to work and risking investigations left half finished, after having to endure the humiliation of emasculating Jared, now this.

Barbara was dead.

Everything he had done to help her avoid the clutches of the committee, everything he had done to help the family retain their position in the department had been made worthless by those two words.

Fortunately, Dora wasn't due at the office for a few more hours. He felt tears welling up and rolling down his cheeks. The computer screen warped and blurred. His eyelashes wanted to stick together when he blinked.

He closed his eyes, unable to ignore the words on the screen burning their way into the deepest recesses of his fears. A few more years and Dora would have been able to retire, passing her part of the family management to Barbara. Now all of their family planning was thrown out. They would have to work doubly hard to ensure the future of the family for Adam, if he was still worth the effort.

They would be stuck now in their run down apartment on the edge of the civilized city, if they were lucky. Otherwise, they would have to move to the wild sections where the jobless and uncivilized lived, where society was outside the protection of the Muses. They would be forced to fend for themselves and scratch out a living from day to day, never knowing what they might face. When they died, the department wouldn't investigate. No one from the city would get involved.

They would be forgotten.

He opened his eyes and blinked away the tears so he could see the computer screen. If there was any chance at salvaging anything, he would need to figure out what happened to Barbara. She was too young to die without help. She hadn't been ill.

He brought up a search agent and entered Barbara's name and identification number before setting it to search through all the recent records for anything associated with her.

After a few minutes, the agent began throwing up references.

There was an investigation that Barbara had gone to that morning, still open. The victim had been one of the five that were in the integrator that had mentioned St. Messien's.

There was the department's trip to the apartment on the report of her death. It had happened right before he had left the VR and found himself in the office. The department wouldn't have notified him at the time anyway since they would do the initial investigation first. He was a member of the family. He could never be objective enough and the victim wouldn't have been anonymous.

There was a charge on her account for the little bistro at the subway station. She had bought food for more than just her, but there was no indication who it might be. Attached was a video clip from the surveillance camera. He doubted he'd recognize anyone but her.

There was a record indicating that she had been taken to the department morgue. There was another record from St. Messien's indicating that she was in their morgue. There was no record of a transfer.

When he looked on the computer at the video of the slot Barbara was in at the department morgue, he could see her face relaxed, as if she were sleeping. Her eyes were still. No dreams.

But when he looked at the video of her assigned slot at St. Messien's, he saw almost the same scene. Her hair was splayed out in a different pattern, but she appeared to be in a dreamless sleep there as well.

He would need to run down to the department morgue and see for himself if Barbara was there. If not, he needed to know why a transfer hadn't been recorded and why she appeared to be in both places.

He glanced down at his crotch and felt around gently, not wanting to press his pants against his underwear. It felt dry. He couldn't see a stain. It might be safe.

Charles walked up to the automatic doors of the department's morgue entrance and waited as they opened. A wave of cold air blew by him, as if the ghosts had been waiting

for someone to open the door so they could go out to wherever ghosts went. His shirt flapped a bit. He could feel the caress of the breeze flowing over his skin and through his hair.

The doors closed behind him, shutting off the ghosts' escape. The air was still cool within the morgue, but it wasn't moving. The lights were bright, almost glaring off the light green tile that lined the walls and covered the floor. They were placed well enough to provide an even light that left no shadows, no place where dirt could hide. The tile gleamed. The place was spotless.

It had been a while since he had been down here. A few things had moved around. It took him a little while to adjust.

A counter without a receptionist stood before him. The budget cuts had reached even down here. On it was an old fashioned metallic bell with a sign informing him to ring it if he needed assistance.

Death hadn't changed in hundreds of years. Morgues were about as quick to evolve.

He rang the bell.

As the reverberations died down, he heard a scurrying in the back, around the corner, out of sight, as if something had been surprised. With the advent of the virtual reality, Charles figured that visitors must be rare. Everyone could see who was in which slot, so why walk all the way down here to see what you could see from the comfort of your office?

After a few minutes, the diener came around the corner, an older, little man with a slight stoop from age. Charles could see over the top of his head. Even though his hair was white, he didn't have a natural skull cap of baldness. He might seem to live down here, but this wasn't his devotion.

He wore green scrubs, a darker green than the tile. He didn't blend in with his environment as a chameleon might. He blended in because he belonged down here. He was an extension of the morgue. This was no cave in which he happened to work, though it was cold like one. Charles felt a shiver travel down his body.

"May I help you?" the diener asked, looked up at Charles.

Charles looked down at him. He saw Jared and wanted to kick this old man, make him fall down and squirm. Destroy him for having to look up. For playing weak, subservient. For forcing Charles into the dominant role.

But this wasn't Jared. As quickly as the rage came, it left, leaving his memory blank for a moment while his vision returned.

"I need to see Barbara," Charles said. He gave the diener the slot number.

A look of recognition crossed the diener's face.

"She came in earlier today," he said. "She's still in the waiting morgue."

Charles must have had a flicker of incomprehension cross his face.

"That's where we put new bodies for a while to see if they wake up," the diener said.

"We attach little virtual bells to their toes."

Charles chuckled to himself, imagining small brass bells tied by a small, dainty ribbon to the big toes of each corpse, each one placed lovingly with the care of a perfectionist who takes pride in his work. Each little bow would be identical after so many years of practice.

The diener turned and indicated that Charles should follow.

After a few turns down corridors, they came to 15-B. The corridors reminded Charles of earlier when he had gone to the meeting in the virtual reality system. There didn't seem to be any logic to them, and 15-B didn't seem to be a particularly important designation except that there it was, stamped on a metal plate attached to the wall half-way up a stack of

four slots. If someone did wake up, they wouldn't be able to sit up. They'd find themselves in a dark, chilled, closed space not much different from a coffin, except that here there was no dirt pressing down on the lid. There was no lid.

The diener opened the door to the one just above the metal plate and pulled out the tray on which Barbara lay. Her head came out first, her hair framing her head as he remembered it doing in the video of the slot. She was peaceful, relaxed. Her eyes weren't moving here either. The video had been consistent with it being a live feed and not a still life study of her.

"She looks as if she were made of wax," Charles said, peering closer at her.

"Everyone does when they come here," the diener said. "The blood leaves the skin, making it noticeably translucent."

Charles sniffed the air above Barbara. There was no smell. No perfume. No body odor. Nothing.

"I don't smell anything," he said. "Shouldn't she smell?"

"She hasn't been gone long enough."

"But no smell at all?"

"We wash the bodies when they come in, to get anything external that might need analyzing." He let out a sigh. "She won't start to smell until tomorrow."

"Sorry for my ignorance," Charles said. "I don't usually look at bodies in person. I'm so used to using the computer."

"As is everyone else. You need to remind yourself once in a while what a real body looks like."

Charles pressed his thumb on Barbara's arm.

It didn't yield.

He pressed harder.

Still, his thumb went nowhere. Her arm was hard as a rock, unyielding to his pressure.

He scraped it with his thumbnail and watched a thin ribbon curl up. He looked over at the diener.

The blood from the diener's face drained, visibly turning his face white at the sight of the curled flesh on Barbara's arm.

"Is this part of the preservation process?" Charles asked.

"I," the diener stammered, "I have no idea why her arm did that." He took a deep breath and let it out. "I've never seen that happen before."

Charles placed his fingers on her lips and pushed down, trying to separate them to see the teeth.

They didn't move.

He leaned in and placed his ear near her chest. He couldn't imagine a whole body made of wax, though that would be the most resilient. He thumped her chest and listened to the echo.

Solid. Not liquid. Nothing squishy or once living.

This Barbara was made of wax.

"She was flesh when she came in," the diener said. "I remember her body. I helped place it on the rack she's on now. My fingers dug in to her calves when we made the transfer."

"You said you monitor these in case they move."

"We do. No alarms went off. They never do."

"Can we look at a few others?" Charles asked.

The diener assented and Charles listed some of the names he could remember from the integrator that Barbara had started earlier.

A couple the diener remembered, but most he had to look up in the computer. Each one was still in the waiting morgue. Each one showed the characteristic curl of flesh when Charles scraped them with his thumbnail. Each one had the same response to the thump. Each one was made of wax. Each one had an uninterrupted video record of them in their slot.

Back in the office, Charles quickly went to the computer and looked up each of the names to see where they were. Each showed the duel location that Barbara had shown, both in the department's morgue and at St. Messien's. None of the records from St. Messien's showed an actual location within their morgue—only that they were there.

What had Barbara been investigating that tied her to the others? All six now were showing connections that he found too suspicious to overlook. Barbara hadn't said anything about the five. Whatever she was looking for she had taken with her. He would have to work blind, and quickly, if he wanted to find out what happened to her and make sure it didn't affect the family.

Who had switched out a wax copy for her body? If he went over to St. Messien's and looked at her there, he might find something. He would have to be careful though. If whoever had done this was at St. Messien's, then he couldn't let on that he suspected anything. No mention of the department's morgue or the other five. No mention of wax.

On the computer, he left a note for Dora to find, indicating that he was running by St. Messien's on the way home and that he would contact her with what he found. He mentioned the waxes and the five plus Barbara.

Then he locked up the computer, turned off the lights, and locked the door on the way out.

CHAPTER X

ADAM AND EVE

Adam leaned against the door, feeling its coolness against his ass and between his shoulders. Dora's footsteps faded until he could only hear the whisper of the air conditioning. He was alone in the apartment for the first time in months, not because he wasn't trusted by the family, but because for all that time there had always been someone at home or traveling between work and home. This time alone was a luxury he didn't want to squander on sleep, as nice as sleep would have been given the weight of fatigue he was feeling from only a few hours' sleep.

He went into the kitchen and set the coffee brewing while he went to get ready for the night. Coffee was one of those things that he enjoyed tasting as much as he enjoyed smelling. He knew people who could enjoy the aroma of a good pot all day but never drink the stuff. The caffeine would help him wake up and get through whatever he was going to encounter that upcoming night.

He planned on spending some time with Eve, but he might have to cut that a bit short now that Barbara was gone. Other business demanded his attention, and he didn't have time for it without arousing his family's suspicions.

He turned on the hot water in the bathroom sink and let it run until it began steaming. He looked at his face. His nose glistened a bit in the harsh light of the vanity. He would need to wash the oils off and clear out any clogged pores. He straightened a few hairs in his eyebrows so they all lined up. A few stray hairs might not distract people too much, but they would betray his lack of respect for his own appearance.

Adam pulled a washcloth off the shelf and soaked it, letting the hot water run through it, trying to get it as hot as he could while still being able to hold it. His fingers were turning red and buzzing. He laid the washcloth on his face and breathed in the vapors, feeling his pores opening up. After repeating this a few times, his face was feeling and looking like his fingers.

The bottle of shaving gel was almost empty—he'd have to remember to put that on the shopping list—but there was enough for today. He worked up a lather and began covering his face, giving himself a white beard as if he were trying to appear a few years older.

He looked at his chest in the mirror. Reasonable definition, but he could use a few trips to the gym. He wasn't getting any younger. He was going to have to work a little harder if he wanted to keep his youth. He could make out a soft down on his chest and, if he turned to the side and looked, on his back. He would need to get a waxing soon, before Charles said anything. Fortunately, it matched his tan enough that it wasn't striking.

He took the razor and ran it under the hot water, letting it become hot. A cold razor would make his skin pucker up. He didn't want to cut himself. After it was hot, he drew it down the side of his face, taking off the thin stubble that had grown since the day before. He continued until his white beard was gone, leaving his skin smooth.

After rinsing off and applying a moisturizing aftershave, Adam looked down at his pubic hair, a small triangle just above his cock. The hair on his balls didn't grow as quickly as that on his face; he could get by shaving there every few days. It had also been a few days since he had trimmed and it was beginning to look a little shaggy. He took the trimmer and ran it through the hair, going from his belly downwards. He finished the edges with the razor before stepping into the shower and washing everything.

After the shower, he dried off, enjoying the soft warmth of the towel. It didn't have the roughness of Charles holding him, feeling Charles's chest hair against his back, but there was some small comfort in its embrace against the cold of the air on his damp skin. He let the towel drop to the floor while he reached for the body lotion. A little on his scrotum would keep it soft for Charles. A little everywhere else would keep his skin from drying out.

The coffee would be ready by now, Adam thought, so he went to the kitchen and poured some cream into a cup before filling it with coffee. He didn't want to scald the cream. He noted the shaving gel on the grocery list stuck on the fridge.

He carried the cup of coffee to his bedroom and sat it down on the desk. The smell was wonderful, clearing his mind and letting him concentrate on the tasks ahead.

Adam opened one of the drawers in his desk and fished around through some junk before unlatching a false bottom and pulling out his journal. He had insisted on having such an antique because he liked old things, like Charles and Dora, and this reminded him of how people worked years ago before the advent of computers. His journal was on paper even though it was very old fashioned, and probably illegal. Paper wasn't subject to review by the department. Nothing he wrote could be used to draw connections between people.

He wrote about Barbara. She couldn't be dead. After all these years of frustration, his father risked having no satisfaction from his work. Adam had fallen in love with Charles and the rest of the family because he knew what his father was trying to do. He hated his father, but this was a time when his interests and those of his father were aligned. He would have to visit him after he was through with Eve.

Eve was interesting. He wanted to please Charles, but wasn't sure how, so he was visiting her to learn. They had been meeting occasionally for a few months, catching a

couple hours here and there as he could sneak out when everyone else was at work or asleep. Tonight wouldn't need any sneaking. She had been walking him through some videos demonstrating various bondage techniques. If he could get Charles to submit, then he would be able to take the weight of making decisions off Charles's shoulders for a little while. He wasn't sure what he'd do once he got Charles in such a position, but he figured something would come to mind.

Not that he wasn't aware of how sex worked—he had seen his share of pornography as a child—but that seemed so mundane. There had to be something else to do once a person was all tied up and all the foreplay had been played. If he took all that out of it, it was nothing that couldn't be done alone. Why bother with the drama that comes from involving someone else?

Adam finished up the day's entry and placed the journal back in the desk drawer, hidden below the pile of junk where no one should find it. Once everything his father was doing had run its course, he might consider sharing it with Charles, but his father needed to believe that the family was ignorant of what he was trying to do. The easiest way to do that was for it to be true.

He had one last thing he needed to do before he left for Eve's. He powered up his computer and sent an e-mail to Charles letting him know that Barbara has died, but that he was looking into a few things that might shed some light on her case. Charles needn't worry if Adam wasn't home later.

He shut off the computer and dressed, feeling the constriction that came with putting clothes on. He missed feeling the air against his skin and the freedom of movement, even with the loose clothing that flowed with him as he walked.

He turned off the lights, closed the door to his bedroom, and left for Eve's.

He didn't right the fallen eight.

He didn't even notice it.

Adam walked down the hall and around the corner to her apartment. He knocked on the door and waited, tapping his foot impatiently. These trips were secret, and he didn't want word getting back to his family from any of the neighbors. After what seemed to be several minutes, but wasn't very long at all, the door opened and she looked out.

She opened the door wide and stepped back, giving Adam plenty of room to enter.

He did.

She shut the door behind him.

"How's Barbara?" she asked.

"Dead," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"She came by earlier, very confused. She was convinced that this was your family's apartment. I had a bit of fun with her before pointing her in the right direction."

Eve walked past him into the living room.

"Dead?" she asked, turning to look at him. "What do you mean, dead?"

He explained what had happened after Dora's scream. He had been asleep up to that point, so he didn't know if Barbara had been acting strangely before she went to the bath. Dora hadn't mentioned anything strange.

"There are a few things I need to look into," he said. "I'll need to leave a bit early tonight."

"Then we need to get busy."

She sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to her.

"Come. Sit down."

He did.

She turned on the video screen.

“I just received this video earlier today. It goes a bit further than we’ve seen before, but I think it’s important to see the relationship being portrayed here. It mirrors your relationship with Charles very well.”

They watched

An older man (with the tag “Chris” floating beside him for a moment) leads a young man (with the tag “John”) to a wooden cross. John is naked except for wrist and ankle restraints. Chris has chaps, boots, and a codpiece. A crowd in robes and masks encircles them, watching them. The camera appears to be part of the crowd.

“Remember that making decisions has nothing to do with which role you’re playing,” Eve said.

Adam thought about the times he and Charles had gone at it. He could still feel the memory of him from the day before. Charles had been in control, as usual. Even though he complained every day about having to make all the decisions in the family, he never let someone else. Adam could enjoy playing the submissive. He constructed himself as such. But if he could take some of the stress from Charles, then he would be doing what he could for the family.

“Tie me down,” John says.

Chris attaches each of the restraints to their respective place on the cross.

“You could be either the older or the younger one. In either case, you could be in control, allowing Charles to enjoy the moment without having to also worry about what was going to happen next.”

That would be the hard part, Adam thought. If Charles wasn't thinking about what was going to happen next, then he'd just start thinking about something from work, and then he'd lose interest, even if he didn't want to.

"Now bind my waist and legs to the frame," John says.

Chris reaches around and draws back some leather straps which he fastens, tightening them until they hold John snug and secure against the frame. The leather frames the groin, drawing attention to it. The camera zooms in for a momentary close up of Chris stroking John's cock. It grows rigid and begins bouncing a little, as if to a heartbeat.

"You don't need to worry about whether or not he's excited by what you want. The important thing to remember is that he's there for your pleasure.

"Play either the Rocket or the Sword, depending on if you want to dominate mentally or physically. Both are appropriate. Think of him as a mirror in which you can practice your cardinality."

Chris looks down at John, expectant.

"I'm not sure Charles sees himself as that," Adam said.

"He's projecting," Eve said. "Deep down, he's a scared child who has built so many walls between himself and the world that now he doesn't know how to be vulnerable and safe.

"As soon as he senses that he's not in control, his flight response kicks in, which kills any libido he might have had."

If Adam could pretend to be practicing aspects of his cardinality that didn't get much play at work, Charles might be receptive. But he would need to start slow and be careful. It was almost like walking into a yard full of dogs.

John whispers and Chris presses forward, kissing him as hard as he can.

He had done that once. A few years earlier, when he was a teenager home for the summer, he had been playing ball at a friend's place. The ball had gone over the fence into the neighbor's yard. He normally wouldn't have thought anything about it, but this yard had four dogs, all of them barking loudly and baring their teeth as he approached the gate.

No one was home and the gate was closed, but their ball was in the yard and they had wanted to keep playing, so he was elected as the one to go over and get it. He wasn't as afraid of dogs as his mother had been.

She would remind him of the time she was chased up a tree by a dog while holding her purse and an umbrella. It was only because the owner of the dog looked out her window and saw his mother in the tree that she was able to come down. There weren't any trees in the yard large enough to hold him, so he'd have to run fast if the dogs came after him.

He paused outside the gate and looked at the feet of the dogs. He held out his hands close to the fence so they could get his scent. He stood as still as he could, as non-threatening as he could, and after a few minutes, the barking and growling died down.

He opened the gate and walked in, slowly, holding his hands out where the dogs could see them. He didn't make any sudden moves, but walked slowly over to the ball, picked it up, and slowly turned to the gate. By that point, the dogs had been standing around him and wagging their tails, sure that he wasn't anything to be afraid of.

With his mouth, Chris presses John's head back as far as it will go.

That looked like fun, Adam thought. To completely let himself go, to release himself from all restraint and push himself as far as he could with Charles. The thought aroused his interest. Not only letting Charles abandon control, but himself as well.

“The key,” Eve said, pointing at the screen, “is to think of your partner as a prop, not as someone who should have input into what you’re doing. That’s the only way you can let go of your own control.”

“Get on your knees and take my testicles in your mouth,” John says. “Do not worry, it will be large enough to accommodate.”

Chris backs up a bit and kneels down. He pauses a bit, as if studying John’s balls, considering how best to accomplish his task.

“Go on,” John says. “It is not that hard. If you have to, take one at a time.”

Adam remembered Charles doing this. It didn’t really do anything for him, but Charles seemed to enjoy it, probably because deep down, Charles wanted someone to do this to him.

Chris finally gets John’s balls into his mouth. He moves them around a bit, as much as he can with his mouth full. His throat bobs as he moves his tongue around. He grimaces, but quickly recovers.

“That is good,” John says. His face relaxes and he closes his eyes.

Chris looks up at John.

A low, expectant moan rises up from the crowd surrounding John and Chris.

“It’s always important to play with expectations. Part of the fun of a relationship is in surprise. Don’t become too predictable.”

“Like jumping out of a cake?” Adam asked, chuckling.

“You have the body for it. Go for something decadent. Something that tells him that he’s wonderful just the way he is.”

“Imagine biting into a juicy steak,” John says.

“Something like a steak. That’s unhealthy and decadent,” Eve said.

“Now, bite as hard as you can.”

Chris opens his eyes wider, as if surprised at what John says.

John takes a few deep breaths, as if preparing himself for what Chris is about to do.

Chris bites down. The muscles in his face bulge from the effort. Slowly, a line of red forms around his mouth and begins to spread, dripping down his chin and onto his chest.

“This is real?” Adam asked.

“Grind your teeth back and forth a bit,” John says through gritted teeth.

“As real as it needs to be,” Eve said. “What’s important here is that John is removing any boundaries that might inhibit Chris.”

“That will get through the tough parts.”

“This is a bit farther than I’d be comfortable going,” Adam said. “This is one of those once-in-a-lifetime things.”

“You’d definitely not want to do this with Charles. But you two could always go out to the wild areas and pick up someone. No one out there contributes to society, so society won’t do anything.”

The thought of having total control over someone excited Adam. It wasn’t something he wanted all the time, but he enjoyed the change that came over someone’s face when they finally broke. When all the pain they received finally stopped being fun and they would do anything to end it. He didn’t wish that on Charles, but if they could see that in someone who didn’t matter, then perhaps Charles could loosen up a bit.

Chris finally bites all the way through and falls back. He stands up and spits everything out of his mouth.

The camera zooms in on John’s wilting figure hanging on the cross.

The screen goes black.

Eve turned off the screen and set down the remote.

“Did that give you some ideas?”

“I’ll try and get Charles out to the wild areas as soon as I can,” Adam said. “I think we’re going make a sport of it.”

He felt the hard ridge in the front of his pants. It would take a few minutes for that to go down so he could leave and head over to his father’s.

Thinking of his father quickly drove from his mind any thoughts of what he wanted to do with Charles.

“I really don’t want to go, but I need to,” Adam said. “The sooner I get there, the sooner I can leave.”

Eve walked him to the door and let him out. Behind him, he could hear the clicks of the locks being put in place.

No turning back now, he thought as he walked down the hall, down the stairs, and out onto the dark, empty street.

CHAPTER XI

CHARLES INVESTIGATES

Charles had never before visited St. Messien's Home for the End of Time. The Home's three hundred acre campus was on the edge of the civilized city, in a less developed part of town that wasn't anywhere near his family's apartment. The map had it directly opposite his usual evening homeward stop. Fortunately, the Home had paid the city to build a subway station not only nearby, but on the same side of the street for the convenience of its customers, their friends, and their families.

He ran up the steps out of the station and onto the street. The sun was already below the horizon. Brilliant rays shot up through the clouds, striating the darkening sky. He walked along the low wall that separated the street from the grounds of the Home. It was just tall enough that he couldn't peer over it, but not so tall that he couldn't see the central building looming above. The glass and white marble sheathing stood out deep red against the sky as it reflected the day's dying light.

It was huge.

He was slightly off center, but not too far. He couldn't see it move as he walked down the street towards the entrance. It stood solidly behind the wall, fixed against the sky. He kept glancing up at it, expecting to notice that he was seeing it from a different angle, but so far he wasn't seeing it change.

When he did reach the entrance gate, he saw that the building was slightly off center. Slightly out of balance. Symmetry purposely tweaked to give a more pleasing experience.

He looked down the smooth, stone paved lane that led through a second gate to the central building. Smaller structures dotted the sprawling campus, but even they were large.

In the distance, behind the Home, he could make out the city wall that had been built (and was still being built on his side of the city) as the wild areas had grown wilder.

The wall was the government's way of protecting its citizens from the territorial gangs that roamed those parts, extorting protection money and goods from whomever happened to live there. Without the citizens paying taxes, the government would founder. Its best paying customers were its primary concern. To do otherwise would be socialist, and the Muses didn't sanction socialist propaganda.

He walked down the lane as the building slowly blocked out more and more stars, filling the sky. What looked like three huge doors stretched half way up the front at the top of a proportional flight of stairs. He could barely make out a few people standing at the top of the steps, dwarfed by the immensity of the building and its decorative doors.

They must be using more reasonable real doors at the bottom, he thought.

As he drew closer, the building grew larger until, at the second gate, it nearly filled his field of vision. The second was larger than the first. The lane stretched the full width of the gate's entrance, but it seemed wider here than at the first.

It must have been widening imperceptibly as it went to the Home. Everything had been engineered to hide the true scale of the place. The result was a diminution of the person approaching.

Having never seen the Home before, the immensity of the project made him pause to take it in. An empty pit opened in his gut and chills washed across his skin as the site sank in.

Somehow, he had to fit himself into the scale that he was finding himself in. Being next to what could have been built for giants was disconcerting. This was the real world.

Nothing virtual about it. Yet nothing he had encountered thus far in the VR had been as different as this.

He had heard about the Home, of course. It had been mentioned in a few architectural articles in the news stream. Whoever had designed it had probably won a few awards. It was difficult to do anything that might get public notice and not get some award for it. With so many committees trying to give things away, it was becoming difficult to find things to give an award to that hadn't already received one. That was one of the problems with the proliferation of endowments that never went away. But everything he had seen about the Home had been headlines and a few photos. He hadn't actually read anything else. The pictures hadn't done the Home justice. Pictures, even if they had a scale on them, couldn't have the impact of actually being in the presence of their subject.

Charles looked at the people he had seen at the top of the steps. In all the time he had walked from the first gate to the second and then stood there fitting himself into the suddenly alien landscape, they hadn't moved.

Looking back to the first gate, it seemed far away. Farther than the second gate had appeared from the first. Farther than the Home appeared now. The shape of the lane and the relative size of the first gate must be messing with his depth perception, Charles thought. What at first had seemed like steps must be part of the architecture. What had looked like people, weren't.

He'd have to bring Barbara here sometime. She enjoyed beauty in all its forms, even when she tried to act professional and suppress it. His vision began blurring as he remembered that Barbara was dead. He wouldn't be able to share any of this with her. He pressed forward against the memory of Barbara and the pressure of the visual assault that came as

his brain tried to make new sense of what he was seeing. The steps turned into terraces. The lane turned into a road. The people into statues high above him.

He came to the end of the lane to the entrance into the building. A simple set of automatic glass doors opened as he approached. Once he was inside, the doors closed behind him. Turning back, he saw that they blocked out almost all the light from outside, not that there was much. The sun had set and the brilliant colors from earlier had faded to pale shades that were rapidly giving way to the black of night.

The lights inside were bright. He couldn't see the fixtures that produced it—they were well placed and hidden as any good architect could do—but their effect was one of shadowless light. It filled the space as if it were the living embodiment of the spirit of the building, revealing itself to benefit everyone who entered. There was no night here.

The ceiling arched over the lobby, reaching up to the top of the building and dividing it in half down the length. In the very center of the lobby was a small circular desk. In the middle of it sat a petit woman ready to swivel around to whomever might approach her.

Charles walked across the lobby to her.

She looked up expectantly as he drew near.

“Which way is to the morgue?” he asked.

She pointed to the large sign hanging over the corridor to his right.

“Oh,” he said, his eyes following her finger. “Right.” He nodded briefly at her, smiled, and turned toward the corridor.

She looked back down at whatever she had been looking at before he had interrupted her.

Probably a game on her computer, he thought. She wasn't in a position to do much else. He was glad that she hadn't asked any questions. It probably wasn't her job to ask questions—only answer them. Purely reactive.

The first thing he needed to do was get a feel for the general layout of the place. The main lobby he was in appeared to be the focal point of the Home. Everything else seemed to be arranged around it. A selection of brochures was spread around the receptionist's desk. He took one of each for later. Some seemed to be written for potential residents, others for their families. The pictures were well composited. The paper was glossy.

He looked around the lobby at the other signs and corridors. It seemed that as people progressed through life, they went around the lobby clockwise beginning on the left with the apartments, then proceeding to the assisted living, hospice care, morgue, and finally the mortuary where they could finally rest.

Hopefully the morgue wouldn't be too busy. He needed to find Barbara, but hadn't a clue where she might be. He would have to rely on some old-fashioned detective work: brute force searching one slot at a time. That was assuming no one was around who could show him where she might be.

The entrance to the morgue wasn't very different than the one in the department, but this one showed good taste in its decorations. The department's morgue was functional, and did its job well, but it wasn't a place that could comfort anyone.

This one could.

The tones were muted. The light was soft. The music could barely be heard, but it was there in the background providing texture to the space. No gust of wind chilled him as he entered. No smell of formaldehyde or anything antiseptic was there. All of the senses were provided input, but none were overpowered.

He wished the department could do something like this, but the expense probably wasn't worth it. They weren't trying to attract customers. They were trying to minimize customers, though not by lacking good taste.

Just as the department morgue had, this one had a bell for him to ring. Taste might be better, but they seemed to operate about the same.

Charles rang the bell.

It didn't ring like the one in the department did. This one was an electronic version that looked like the traditional metal ones, but it notified the staff quietly without altering the ambient sound in any grating fashion.

After a few minutes, the diener entered the waiting area. He wore a trim business suit that flattered his figure. His hair had a bit of grey around the edges and he wore the unobtrusive ring of the Muses on his right hand, a simple band of metal indicating his allegiance and faith in their work. This one had a thin line of gold in the center, dividing the band into two parts, as if it were two rings in one.

"How may I help you," he said, watching Charles.

Here was a man who knew his place, Charles thought. Here was a man who had not yet been mastered by his work, but was doing what he was supposed to do. As a Fish, the diener took professional interest in what Charles needed. The diener was here to put a human face on the institution. This was an intermediary and nothing more.

"I," Charles started. He reminded himself that he was trying to find Barbara. His voice caught.

"I'm trying to find a member of my family who died earlier today."

He wasn't used to this kind of emotion welling up within him. He was a man, strong and stable. He hadn't been raised to be vulnerable. He had to find out what had happened to Barbara if the family was going to survive. They were depending on him.

"I was told that she had been taken here."

"What was her name?" the diener asked.

"Barbara," Charles said, rattling off her identification number without thinking.

The diener closed his eyes and thought for a bit, as if running through a roster in his head.

"She came in, but she's not ready for viewing yet," he said.

"May I see her?"

"Not until tomorrow," the diener said. "Put a good night's rest between you and today and things will be a lot easier."

He put a hand out and gently took hold of Charles's shoulder.

"Come back tomorrow and we can talk about arrangements. Perhaps bring the rest of your family."

Charles didn't want to raise any suspicions. If he was going to find out what was up with Barbara, he'd have to come back tomorrow and see the diener. If he was careful, he could look around the rest of the Home and see if anything unusual was going on.

"I would like to have a look at some of the interment options," Charles said. "I'll be able to prepare the rest of the family on the way here tomorrow."

"Of course," the diener said.

He walked to the door through which he had come and opened it.

"Right this way."

He held the door open for Charles to follow him.

They entered a corridor with plush carpet that silenced their footsteps. The hall was as well appointed as the waiting area; it was definitely meant as a place for customers to be. Small framed prints of forests and mountains hung on the walls, breaking up the solid color and providing a view of a world from the past. Death invoked nostalgia, and the Home accommodated by removing any taboo that might surround it.

Memories were encouraged.

Charles wasn't wanting to consider how to bury Barbara, but fate seemed to have thrust him into another world. He had seen hundreds of dead people as part of the family's job. He had even attended funeral rites for members of families close to his. He and Dora had had older members of the family precede them and had been at those rites. This was the first time he was going to have to deal with a death and at the same time have to be involved in the arrangements for the rites.

Several open doors lead off to small rooms where a few family members might gather before the final rites. They passed these until they came to a larger room with caskets (for the rich, old fashioned types who wanted to display the dead in a box—Charles had never attended a last rite where the person was in a casket) and a wall of capping stones that had a range of amenities for those visiting their loved one in the mortuary after the rite.

They entered the room and the diener walked Charles to the wall of capstones, ignoring the caskets at the other end of the room. Charles didn't dress as money, old or new.

Each casket and capstone had a list of features and, in large print so no one could mistake it, the credit transfer required to have the item. The Home was there for the customer, but the customer had to be there for the Home. No one was giving anything away for nothing, even if one of them was grieving and thinking only of the immediate future.

Prices didn't mean as much when they could be justified over an eternity of usefulness. The Home was "for the End of Time."

Charles looked through the stones.

The cheapest were simple stones with the name of the deceased, their cardinality, and their life's bookend dates. These were designed for family sections in a mortuary, where the family's identity didn't need to be on every stone.

The diener stood beside him, following his eyes but allowing Charles to look through the stones in silence. He knew when not to interrupt.

Some stones had additional room for short poems and life-defining memes that the family thought were the foundation of the deceased personality. His work in the department had shown Charles years before that few people knew anyone. He doubted his own family truly knew him, though Dora might be the closest. The Charles that he felt he was would be different than the Charles that Dora thought she knew, and that one would be different yet from the one that Barbara or Adam thought they knew. Everyone had a different set of experiences on which to draw, and so no one was a true, single, individual.

Other stones were more enlightened and allowed small sets of clips from the person's life to be played. The more expensive ones could project the sound and visual so only the person wanting to see and hear it did so, protecting their privacy and the quiet of the mortuary.

A quiet beep came from the diener's pants. He swiftly put his hand in his pocket.

"I need to go," he said. "Take your time. When you're ready to leave, head back down the hall the way we came and then out to the lobby."

Luck. That's all Charles could attribute that beep to. He would be left alone for a short while.

“Not a problem,” Charles said. “I don’t think I’ll have any problem finding my way back.”

He took a step sideways to see more capstones.

“I won’t be too much longer here.”

The diener nodded his head and started to turn to leave.

He paused.

“Don’t worry about prices. We can always work something out.”

“Of course,” Charles said, though he wasn’t sure how they could afford some of the higher end ones even if they could get a payment plan.

“The important thing is that you and your family are comfortable with your choice. You have enough to work through, you don’t want to worry later that you could have made a different, better choice to honor your loved one.”

Charles wished the diener would leave so he could move on to some of the other rooms in the morgue.

“I’ll pick out a few so we don’t take as much time tomorrow,” he said.

The diener left the room and Charles in peace.

Charles took a few minutes to quickly look at the rest of the capstones. They weren’t bad. As with everything else here, they were tasteful. No garish colors. No designs that tired the eyes. Everything was easy to read and understand.

He turned from the wall and glanced quickly at the caskets. They were an order of magnitude higher than the capstones. His family would not be using those any time soon. He could see why they were expensive though. They were made from what looked like real wood that had been harvested while still alive, something that the Home must be buying

from collectors. The cloth inside was luxurious natural silk. The seams were perfect lines. The ruffles were evenly distributed. The linings and pillows were smooth.

Charles left the room and turned away from the waiting area. If the diener or someone else found him, he'd feign forgetting which was his right and left. It would be difficult to play anything else when all he had to navigate was a single corridor.

He walked down the hall, passing another room that had caskets and capstones on display. They were arranged exactly as the room he had just left. They were prepared for several families to be on-site making arrangements. The Home was prepared to cater to the individual family—make them feel that they were the only one the Home was concerned about.

At the end of the corridor there was a turn. He peeked around and saw no one there. It extended a ways with a door at the end. If he got caught here, he could act as if he was almost at the waiting area. The door looked the same.

He walked to the door and looked behind him. He was alone.

He placed his ear against the door to see if anyone was talking inside. He couldn't hear anything. He looked at the bottom of the door and saw some light between the door and the carpet. He wouldn't have to worry about finding a light switch.

He opened the door and peeked in. He couldn't see anyone. The light was brighter than in the corridor, similar to the light in the lobby. It was everywhere and coming from nowhere in particular.

He entered the room.

A half-dozen gurneys lined the far side of the room. Each one had a person lying on it.

Charles felt his heart beating in his chest. It was a discomfiting sensation. He was aware of every beat and every breath. He felt himself bouncing with the beat, as if his heart was trying to escape.

He slowly walked over to the gurneys, afraid of what he was going to find.

None of them were Barbara, but he caught his breath when he recognized one of them from the set that Barbara had put in the integrating agent at the office.

He turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XII

ADAM GOES HOME

Adam's stomach churned at the thought of visiting his father, but if he could save Barbara and keep his family intact, it was worth it. He slowly walked down the hall from Eve's apartment, wishing he could get back to how he felt for those brief moments when he didn't have to care about anything and could focus on what she had been presenting. Those few moments when he had seen what he and Charles might do in the wilds, together, that could reclaim them from his birth family.

The city center seemed to be all about control, but he had grown up with that in the wilds. He had grown up with a single mother and father, a small family by the Muse's standards. His mother had watched everything he did and made sure it conformed to her notions of what was right.

The night he had finally made the decision to leave the wilds and come to the city was still vibrant in his mind. It had taken a few years for him to make it a reality, but the decision had been made. Everything else just followed.

He had been running around with a friend of his from school named Peter. They had met the first year in senior high school and spent the summer together as often as they could. They had talked about leaving the wilds for the city when they graduated. They would live together and start a new family.

One day, Peter brought over a book he had gotten from someone else. It was propaganda from the Muses talking about how wonderful the new society was. After Peter had left, Adam locked the door to his room and took the book into his bathroom where he could read it in privacy.

It wasn't long before Adam heard his bedroom door open. He was sure he had locked it before going into the bathroom to read the small book.

"Oh, no," he had thought to himself as he hurriedly folded up the magazine on his lap and stashed it under a towel in the cabinet next to the commode. He pulled his dick up from between his legs and began massaging it, trying to get it hard. He tried to concentrate on Peter, naked, sprawled on his bed, leaning on his elbows and looking up at Adam, expectantly waiting for him to join. Someday, he had thought that they might run off together to the city, though it never happened.

Adam had liked Peter better than his own father. Peter didn't hurt as much.

Adam's mother walked around the corner and stood in the door of the bathroom.

"Mother!" he said. "Why can't I have some privacy?"

His mother seemed visibly relieved when she saw what he was doing.

"He's just jacking off," she said over her shoulder.

Adam saw a young man walk up behind her. Matt was one of the ministers in their area. He had grown up in an upstanding family and had entered the ministry the year before. He was cute. Adam felt himself blush.

"Karen," Matt said, "I think I can handle this. It's common in young men his age. Give me a few minutes to talk with him alone." Adam saw Matt wink at him behind his mother. "It might be less embarrassing for him."

Adam felt his cheeks get even warmer.

His mother trusted their ministers implicitly, as if they could walk on water or turn it into wine themselves. They could do no wrong, even if they were left alone with a young man who had his pants pulled down and his dick in his hand.

Things just worked out. If they didn't, she prayed harder, sure that what she determined God's will to be would come to pass if she only purified herself and spent more time talking to Him. Of course, she also made sure that the target of her prayers knew exactly what God's will was that she was hoping would come about.

This time wasn't going to prove any different for her. Matt might be young and still learning the ways of the ministry, but he was a minister, ordained by God, taking his place among the Apostles, transubstantiated into Christ.

His mother turned and spoke softly to Matt, low enough that Adam couldn't make out what she was saying. It was brief, so it couldn't have been too complex. Probably asking for a report afterwards. She walked out of the room and closed the door, leaving Matt in the room standing in the doorway to the bathroom. Adam was still sitting on the toilet, but he had relaxed his hand and let it rest on his leg. He looked up at Matt.

Matt stepped back out of the doorway and motioned to the bed.

"Come on," he said, "I know you weren't too serious about it. Let's sit on the bed and talk."

Adam stood up and pulled up his pants. He reached back and flushed.

Matt laughed.

"What were you doing?" He looked a bit puzzled. "You really weren't jacking off, and you weren't doing anything else that might need a toilet."

Adam looked down at the floor and inched over to the bed.

"You had the door locked, too."

Adam sat down beside Matt and put his hands between his legs, trying to make himself smaller, obfuscated, hoping that Matt would forget that he was there.

He had no response. He hadn't thought about getting caught, but Matt had noticed all the details that his mother never saw, or chose not to. She did have a way of ignoring little things that didn't fit in with her world.

Matt put his hand over on Adam's leg, lightly. More comforting than caressing. Matt definitely wasn't flirting with him, but he was letting Adam into his personal space, and making sure he was slowly breaching Adam's.

"Don't worry," Matt said. "Whatever you were doing will be just jacking off when I tell your mother. I'll council you that while it won't lead to hairy palms or blindness, it can lead to lustful thoughts, which are distracting for someone trying to be like Christ.

"But that's for your mother. I don't buy any of it. It doesn't make sense for sex to be the only emotion we can't express. Someone your age is going through a lot of changes and probably having a lot of questions, and not just about sex. This is when you start looking outside the home your parents provided and realize there's a world out there. There's a lot to learn, and most parents really aren't wanting to help. Oh, they'll provide a bed at night and a warm meal. They'll get you through school and teach you all kinds of nonsense. But the only way you can really figure out what's out there is to experience it.

"So, now that we've established that you're perfectly normal, what were you doing?" Matt looked at Adam.

Adam looked up at Matt and met his gaze.

"You won't tell mother?" he asked.

"I promise," Matt said. "You have enough to deal with without your mother trying to manage you. If she had her way, you'd stay twelve forever, a beautiful cherub in her little corner of heaven on earth."

"More like hell, if you ask me."

Matt laughed.

“It can seem that way sometimes,” he said.

Adam smiled.

“I was reading,” he said. “Something that mother wouldn’t like. That’s why I had the door locked.”

“What were you reading that you wanted to hide?”

Adam thought for a bit. It was a small book. There weren’t even any pictures.

He retrieved the book and handed it to Matt, who thumbed through it.

“I’ve seen their work before,” Matt said. “It’s very persuasive.

“You aren’t thinking about running away to the city are you?”

Adam had been reading.

The Muses talked about the flexibility that came with the larger family that was becoming the usual in the city. Everyone pitched in instead of a single person going off to work each day. No one had to feel the burden of supporting an entire family all by themselves.

If he went into the city, he wouldn’t have to follow his father, away from home all day and then working through the night just so his children could have a respectable home.

He’d have time to sit in the cool of a shade and enjoy a leisurely lunch with friends. He wouldn’t have to find the one, single person in the world he would have to spend the rest of his life with. He could build a life where he wouldn’t be stuck with something he might regret later.

If he could get into the city, he could be different than his family.

“Well,” Adam said, stretching it out until each letter was itself a word.

“Look at my parents,” he said. “They don’t seem too happy here. They hardly see each other, with my father always busy with work. And my mother.” He shook his head. “She’s always keeping herself busy with other people so that she never notices him not there.” He looked at Matt. “What kind of future is that? Why would I want to do that to someone?”

“My family’s not any better than yours,” Matt said. “Most people don’t see what goes on in the home. All of us had little jobs here and there since I can remember, with the money going to my parents so they could afford to put us through school, buy clothes that weren’t second hand, feed us well.

“The single most important thing parents can do is get good food for their children. They could do that, but if we didn’t work, they wouldn’t be able to provide everything else that made us the upstanding family that we are.

“For all the talk about values and honesty and camaraderie, no one admires a family that dresses in hand-me-downs at church meetings. They might love and pity them, but where’s the honor in that?”

“So why did you go into the ministry?” Adam asked. If Matt had been working so his family could have what they needed, then he would be missed. He was old enough to pull in quite a bit.

“It was the only way to escape,” Matt said. “Yes, they will miss the income, but I’m one less person they need to feed now. Besides, having a son in the ministry is quite honorable. It makes up for any slip they might make.”

“I know my mother thinks that.”

“She’s typical of many members of the church. They’re more understanding of any perceived hardships. To have a son leave everything behind and go into the ministry must be hard, they think. They don’t realize what that son is leaving behind. They think of books

and clothes and friends. I think of the long hours after school and on the weekends, the beatings for falling short of a month's quota."

"No one ever talks about that at church."

"And they won't. Everyone knows that's what it takes to be successful, but everyone ignores it."

"I don't have a job and we get along okay."

"Everyone thinks they get along okay because they don't know anything else. Your father works two jobs, at least. He might have some others on the side that I don't know about. Your mother does laundry and ironing for the neighborhood. You wear jeans and t-shirts to church.

"The result though is that you have meat for at least one meal every day. You have plenty of milk and decent vegetables that aren't all from a can."

"How do you know what we have all the time? You're not here very often."

"You don't talk about how the meals are special or different. When I'm here, I know I'm seeing everything as it always is.

"You might not have a lot, but you're being set up to be successful. I wish I had grown up in your home. I might not be a minister."

"Do you regret going into the ministry? You said you wanted to get out of the situation you were in, but if that hadn't been the case," Adam trailed off, letting the silence put the question.

"You mean, did I have dreams and ambitions that didn't include the ministry?"

Adam nodded. He thought of the book and the city. There were opportunities in the city that weren't here. Matt could have gone there instead.

“I would love to finish my education and do something like your father, working with computers, helping them learn how people work. I think that’s why I went into the ministry: I like thinking about people.

“But my test scores are so low that I can’t get into a school good enough for that. The only time we had good meals at home was when the ministers were there. We were always begging them to come so we could get something other than gruel.

“That’s also how I know you eat well all the time. You’re never asking us to come over. You just wait your turn and enjoy us being here.”

“Would you have considered going to the city if you hadn’t been accepted into the ministry?”

“Perhaps,” Matt said. “But that would have been a strong blow to my family’s place in the church. I love my parents, even if they haven’t been the best. If I went to the city, they’d probably disown me. It would be the only way to preserve their own standing.”

“Do you think my parents would disown me?”

“Your mother probably would. She’s a lot more into the church and its society than your father is. He’s just trying to get through life as best he can. Your family also doesn’t have a lot to lose if you did go. You haven’t invested as much into looking good as my parents have.

“My parents love the church and their place in it more than they love any of their children. Your parents love you and will stand by you regardless of what you do, even if they don’t agree with it.” That sounded almost like permission to go to the city when he left home, Adam thought.

As the train left the city walls behind, Adam was filled with a mixture of relief from being back in the familiar territory of his youth and the apprehension of returning some control to his parents while he was there.

Compared to the beaconed towers of the city center, the wilds were old and falling apart, but they were home where he knew how to act. All the social cues could be subtle and unnoticed, unlike the city center where he had to be constantly aware of what people were doing, though in the city, he could be himself without the constraints of family and religion.

The train stopped at the familiar station that had been there longer than he had been alive. It needed a fresh coat of paint and some patching. The original color of the floor peeked out in a few corners where people hadn't walked much. It was a mature station that had settled in for the long years.

Adam got off the train and walked through the station. A few others got off as well, but most on the half empty train were traveling on, probably past the wilds. There wasn't much to do other than visit old family who couldn't come into the city.

The streets weren't as clean and efficient as the ones in the city, but they were alive with people. Children ran in a forest of legs and bicycles and stands. Vendors hawked whatever they could, most of it part of the black market that the Muses chose to ignore, as they did most everything out in the wilds. Conversations were loud and animated. He threaded his way through all of this inefficiency, letting himself fall back into the familiar rhythms of his home area.

The sounds faded from his attention and he felt himself becoming the young school boy returning home, running through the street with his mates, terrorizing the neighborhood cats. That was the favorite part of every day, when he could let himself go, between school

and home. When he would get near enough to his house that he could see it, he would quiet down while his friends would carry on. He didn't want his mother scolding him.

Adam turned on to the road his parents lived on and left behind the main street. This one was a bit quieter. The trees had grown over the road, shading it, blocking out the stars. The wind rustled the leaves. A few drops of water fell from them, shaken off from the earlier storm.

He paused at the gate and looked his parent's house over. It fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. The gutters were starting to sag. Tree branches poked out of the shadows on the roof where they had fallen. His father hadn't swept them off yet. The flower beds had a few winter weeds still left, though the yard had been mowed recently.

It was still the home he had grown up in.

He went up to the door and knocked. His parents weren't expecting him, and he wasn't sure what they might say. They hadn't been very happy to see him leave for the city, though he had been communicating with his father since.

His mother opened the door.

"I'm here to see father," he said.

She looked him up and down, taking in how he had changed since leaving a couple years before.

"I don't like how you've changed," she said, but she stood back and let him pass.

"Your son's here to see you," she yelled into the back of the house.

She turned back to Adam. "I'm heading to bed. Don't be loud."

Adam walked into the living room and saw his father coming out of his office.

"What brings you here?" his father asked.

"You could have asked how I've been," Adam said, wishing his parents could care.

His father sighed and looked around the room.

“Just tell me why you’re here. I have work to get back to.”

At least he hadn’t been thrown out of the house yet.

“I need to know what happened to Barbara,” he said, trying to speak quietly enough that his mother wouldn’t hear. She didn’t know anything about what he and his father had been doing.

“Nothing happened. I’ve been working on Charles to get him to think something’s wrong.”

“She’s dead.”

His father blinked a few times and pursed his lips.

“It’s nothing I did,” he said. “Come in,” he beckoned Adam into the office. “Let’s see what we can find out. Then you’ll need to head back. Mother isn’t too happy when your name comes up, and seeing you tonight is going to make the next few days hell for me.”

CHAPTER XIII

DORA IN THE OFFICE

Dora climbed up onto the street from the subway station. The streets were empty at this time of night. Her family was one of the few that had a position that required someone all day, every day. Criminals didn't keep regular business hours, and neither could the department or her family. Even with Barbara gone, her family had to keep going and somehow manage to grieve and then accept their loss while helping the rest of the city keep some sense of order.

There were too many odd things going on though for Barbara's death to be entirely happenstance. Barbara had seemed a bit stressed, though she did tend to bring work home with her when she didn't need to. Charles had been acting oddly, leaving early from the apartment and arriving late to the office. Adam hadn't seemed concerned enough, as if he knew something the rest of them didn't.

Dora wondered if she had been living in her own little world, disconnected from whatever it was that the others had. She did tend to keep to herself and determine her own direction. She had been the one in the family the longest and had the largest hand in shaping it. She had built it up to what it was today, one of the best investigating families in the department with a good mix of skills. Not everyone had the strongest analytical abilities. She knew that Barbara was still trying to figure out where exactly she fit in, which is why Dora had wanted her in the family.

People like Barbara were hard to find. Someone who could see through the propaganda of the Muses and try to find their own place in the world based on who they were

and not on what they were pushed into. Someone who could question the assumptions everyone else accepted as common sense.

Someone had once published a method for predicting the stock market. It had been dead on accurate, until everyone knew about it. Then it went flat. Instead of following the luck of the companies being traded, stocks began following the prediction, which turned out to be self-fulfilling in the end. It had taken a whole generation to get that model out of everyone's expectations and get the market back where it should have been. The stock market didn't track accurate knowledge about companies, but the inaccuracies in the common sense that arose when everyone was working independently.

Barbara couldn't know that she was normal, even if society tried to tell her otherwise. Dora had wanted to see her blossom in her own time and in her own way. Until then, she had hoped that the family would be a good enough buffer to give Barbara the time she needed.

While she needed to figure out what might have happened to Barbara, she also needed to catch up on anything Barbara might have been working on her own. One of the first things she liked to do when investigating was try and understand the victim as much as she could. There was always a good chance that whoever perpetrated the crime was someone known to the victim, if not a close associate. If Barbara's death was purely natural, then she wouldn't be able to turn up anything, but she doubted it was. There had to be something else going on.

They all had little pet projects that they didn't bother the rest of the family with; projects that might someday become full blown investigations if they found any significant correlations that might raise suspicion. Dora had encouraged them. It gave them something challenging between all of the mundane cases.

The entrance to the department was quiet and unimposing. The days when the department might have felt the need to puff out its chest and dominate the landscape were gone. All questions of place and proper order had been resolved by the Muses. These days, the department preferred its work go unnoticed.

Dora picked up a cup of coffee and a donut from the shop across the street from the department before going in to the office. This was part of her ritual going in to work. It didn't matter which shift she was covering. The coffee and sugar boost would get her into the zone that allowed her to get done what she had been living her whole life to do. Everything always came down to the moment she was in, and she wanted to do the best work she could.

Dora entered and passed through the security ring. Even if Charles were in the office still, which hadn't happened for a few weeks now, the computer would be putting together everything it felt she needed to know at the start of her shift. Relevant news stream items concerning cases the family had been involved in recently. Internal files from other sections reporting on tests or related work. Potential work items for the computer suggested by the information it had.

Years before, when e-mail had been the epitome of computer usage, people would go to the office and spend the first hour sipping their coffee and working through their e-mail. Now, Dora would take that hour and sign off on everything the computer thought it should do. The rest of her time could be spent trying to piece bits of the puzzles together, trying to catch the parts the computer missed. Those were usually the small idiosyncrasies that still separated people from machines.

The walk down the corridor to the office was brief. As Dora expected, the door was closed and the lights were out. Charles had already left. No surprise there.

The computer screen lit up as she walked in to the office and then around the desk. It was waiting for her. If she didn't know better, she would think it was even happy to see her, its virtual tail wagging in anticipation.

Computers had come a long way in her time, but they still weren't much more intelligent than the common house dog. They could compute quicker than any person and could sift through vast amounts of data; they appeared smart not because they could learn heuristics, but because they could brute force faster than anything else. They also could catch things that people tended to let drop because people did use learned heuristics, and there were always exceptions to those rules.

Computers and people in the modern age were as complementary as dogs and people had been millennia ago.

Dora sat her coffee down on the desk and read through what the computer had dragged up, correlated with the work her family had done since her last shift. Nothing about Barbara. She doubted her family would have gotten the case, but she had hoped that something would have shown up. Either Charles hadn't done anything, or the computer was intentionally (well, with as much intention as a computer could muster) withholding something.

She dug around on the computer looking for any hidden areas that Barbara might have used for her pet projects. If the computer wasn't going to come up with anything as a starting point, she would make her own.

The computer chirped and popped up a picture of Charles, indicating that he was trying to contact her. They needed to retake the pictures the system used. The Charles she was seeing on the computer screen didn't have quite as much grey hair as the one she knew was on the other end of the call.

She indicated that she would accept. The picture shrank away and she could hear the night time noises of the city. Charles wasn't at home.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm on my way home," Charles said, "but I wanted to talk to you as soon as I felt it was safe."

"We're in the city. Of course we're safe." Dora grinned at the irony. "We should know more than anyone."

"That's just it," Charles said.

His voice seemed a bit strained. Dora wasn't sure if he was finally cracking from whatever had been stressing him and causing him to miss time in the office.

Charles mentioned looking through some of Barbara's agents and files and finding a correlation that seemed to point to St. Messien's Home for the End of Time. Dora followed his directions and looked through the same information. The Home did seem a bit suspicious.

"After I found those files, I decided to take a look at some of the bodies to see if I could spot anything," Charles continued. "When I went down to the morgue there in the department, all of the bodies on that list that we looked at were not real. Someone replaced them with very well done wax replicas."

"The computer also has those same people as being at the Home, so I went there."

He continued, telling how he had gone in and looked around.

"There's a room at the end of the hall that had some gurneys in it. One of the bodies was on the list that Barbara was compiling."

Charles's voice went up a notch.

“I’m scared,” he said. “I never thought I’d be, but there’s something going on that’s bigger than it looks. I’m not sure what Barbara was on to, but I’m wondering if she might have kicked over an ant hill somewhere.”

“Get home and get some rest,” Dora said. She remembered leaving Adam alone in the apartment. “Have some time with Adam. He could use the company. I’ll dig around here and see what I can find.”

Dora ended the call and started an agent to find out everything it could about the Home and its interface with the department. She hoped to find out how the bodies might have been transferred and the wax models placed in the department’s morgue. It would have had to have been an inside job if it had gone unnoticed as Charles had mentioned.

The agent quickly returned with a few nonsensical results and indicated that there was nothing else to find. It also indicated that there were several databases that seemed to have information relevant to what it was looking for, but they had locked down when it had begun poking through them. If that was because they had been programmed to detect anyone trying to connect the Home to the department, then that meant that there was a connection that someone didn’t want discovered.

Perhaps Charles was right to be concerned.

Dora tried a few different rewordings of what she was looking for, but the agent kept quickly returning with the same results. Whatever programming had been done had to be brilliant. It was able to detect her intention regardless of how obliquely she tried to approach the topic.

She wasn’t a computer expert. They were tools she could use, but how they worked wasn’t something she had spent too much time on. She had crimes to solve. She did know

who might be able to find a way around the blocks though, and they weren't outside the city.

Dora locked the computer and walked down the hall to an office she rarely visited. It was small and dark, more a closet than an office. The only light was the glow from the computer screens that filled every available space on the desks lining the walls.

This was the office of Sous, the department's resident computer expert. He was one of the only people Dora knew who had not grown up in the city. When he had been born, his parents had been adamantly opposed to everything the Muses stood for. They effectively disowned him when he decided to move to the city center and work for the department instead of becoming a chef. Not only was he leaving what they saw as the free world, but he was working to maintain that difference.

Dora knocked on the door frame. Just standing in the door wasn't enough. When Sous was engrossed in something, he wouldn't notice anyone else. His world was the computer at that point, and everything else was just background to be ignored.

He raised a hand in recognition of her knock but kept reading for another minute or two before turning to her. The glow from the screens gave him a pallor as if he never went home and never went outside.

"Do you need something?" he asked.

Dora explained what she was trying to do with the agent and how it was getting blocked regardless of what she tried.

"The department has its independent systems that no one outside the department can access," Sous said. "They're just for this kind of situation where someone might have compromised the publicly connected computers."

"What will that do for us?"

“It will help us hide from whoever is blocking your agents. It’ll be a little slower because we don’t upgrade those machines as often.”

“See how fast you can make it work. I don’t have as much time as I’d like. Charles was at St. Messien’s and found some things that make us think Barbara’s there, somewhere. We need to get to her before they do anything.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Sous said, turning to the consoles and typing in whatever arcane language they required.

Invocations had to be said perfectly if the computer spirits were to respond favorably. Dora kept quiet so she wouldn’t interrupt him. He could type and read, or he could talk. Trying to get him to do both usually resulted in him taking longer as he tried to correct mistakes.

“They’ve hidden themselves well,” he said. “Even the backup systems are having a hard time digging up what you need.”

He typed a bit more on the keyboard, pausing a few times and closing his eyes, as if trying to find just the right thing to tell the computer.

“But we’re getting it,” he said, as if the long silence hadn’t happened. Even the cadence and pitch of his voice matched where he had left off.

Dora waited. He was busy and would let her know whatever he found, eventually. Saying anything would just slow him down. That didn’t keep her from tapping her fingers against her leg though. It was one of those habits that crept up on her. Only when she was surrounded by silence did she become self-conscious about it.

She stopped and raised her hand to the door frame, shifting, filling more of the doorway with herself.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anyone running St. Messien’s,” he said. “I’ve looked through all their records and there are no employees above mid-level management.

“Everyone at that level seems to be controlled by the computer. Whatever was blocking you was hiding this, so I suspect they are the same system.”

“Anything about Barbara?”

“Not really,” he said. “Nothing came up with her name attached, but there seem to be quite a few people there that aren’t on the official lists.”

“Any indication of where they are in the Home?”

“Most are in the mortuary wing, if my reading of the locations is right. If they are computers, I expect them to use some kind of logical labeling, especially if they don’t think anyone will find out what they’re doing. Good security is layered, but the layers have to run out eventually.”

“I’m going to go over there and see if I can find her. Are there some back ways in so I can avoid the staff?”

Sous pulled up some maps that Dora didn’t recognize.

“These are on the backup system,” he said. “We always keep our good maps there so nothing can alter them. Periodically, we feed them back to the main system.”

He tapped at a few circles.

“These are areas that always change on the main system copy. Avoid them, because we can’t trust the security of our cameras there.”

He switched views and brought up another overlay.

“These squares,” he said, pointing them out on the screen, “are things that are never picked up by our mapping equipment, but present on the old paper maps.”

“You trust the mappers?”

“If whatever is making this stuff disappear on the main system maps could make it never show up with the mapper, it probably would. We suspect we have two different culprits on our hands. I’d trust the areas that the mapper doesn’t show if I’m trying to figure out why I don’t trust the other areas.”

“How late are you going to be here?”

“Until I fall asleep. The director has a deadline coming up and I need to put some data together.”

“Stay awake as long as you can. I’m going to need your help.”

CHAPTER XIV

ADAM DIVES INTO THE VR

Adam walked past his father and into the office. It was the same as it had been the few years before when he left home. Even the slap on his ass as he walked in was the same. He winced and gritted his teeth. Someday, when he didn't need his father, he would do something.

There was no need for any overhead light. One wall was covered in computer monitors with wires snaking down and across the floor to the computers humming around the center table. A few keyboards lay awkwardly on top of piles of papers and ring-bound binders. This was a museum to old tech, the type that had been made when things were made to last for years.

His father closed the door and walked over to the table.

"Let's see what we can find," he said as he sat down in front of one of the keyboards.

"The system might be new, but down inside, it's the same one that we developed nearly thirty years ago." His fingers flew on the keys and text started scrolling on one of the monitors.

Adam couldn't watch both at the same time, and when he concentrated on just one, it was a blur. His father was a master at what he did. An explorer who could bend the virtual world to his own design until he found what he was looking for.

"What are you looking for?" Adam asked, trying to get some context for what he was seeing.

"I'm looking through the list of recently active simulations to see what's been accessed by Barbara."

“You still don’t have one of the nice easy-to-use interfaces like we have in the department,” Adam said. Not even the programs that his father used seemed to have changed much.

“Those are nice,” his father said, “but I don’t trust them. They like to hide too much that I need to see. Besides, they are part of the program we’re trying to figure out.

“It’s much easier to study something that you aren’t part of and aren’t depending on. If we were to use the same interface you use in the office, we would be paying more attention to what we didn’t see than what we could see. We would want to know what the program was hiding, but the only way to figure that out would be through spending a lot of time poking at it from every conceivable angle until we could build a map of the boundaries within which it let us work.

“Then we would try to figure out what was outside those boundaries and somehow connected with what we were looking for. That would give us some idea of where to look, but we’d still have to go outside the system at that point to see what we were looking for. The computer would never show us.”

“But you’re in the system now, aren’t you?” Adam asked.

“Not really. What you’re seeing me in is the system that the virtual realities live in. This is the larger system in which the stuff we’re interested in is embedded. Through this, we can hide things from the virtual reality and see things that the VR wants to keep hidden.”

“So what’s this system embedded in?”

“It’s elephants all the way down. Every time you peel away a layer, you find another, until you cross over from software to hardware, but then you’re operating in the universe where the software is physics. No one has been able to stand outside that system and figure

out how things work. For all we know, there's some kind of foam that our universe is just a bubble in."

"From here, you can see everything that's going on in the VR?" Adam asked, amazed that anyone could capture a sense of everything that was happening in the computer.

"I can see an overview. Enough to know what to look at in more detail." Adam's father tapped a few keys and text scrolled across the screen. He pointed at a few lines.

"For example, here's a list of active VRs being used by the department."

"I never realized just how powerful the computers must be to make all of that work," Adam said. "Each of those VRs must have a dozen people plugged in, each seeing what to them looks like a realistic environment. I've been there. If I didn't know better, I'd think it was real."

"What we're seeing here is just a peek into the VR system. There's not a single computer that this runs on. It runs across the complete net. That's what I was working on with Barbara's father: creating a system that could span all computers so it could grow as it needed to."

"So somewhere out there, there's a big room filled with computers?"

"No. We followed the example of the early net, creating something that could survive an attack on any particular part. We took advantage of some of the virus research at the time to get the system into every computer without it being noticed. It could spread as needed without requiring a central master, though we do have the system you're seeing here where we can see what's going on, but that's a convenience for us, not a real representation of the system."

"There's no real central control? No console that gives you access to everything?"

“Not at all. That’s the beauty of it. I’m using a program that communicates with the parts that it knows about, but that’s like trying to figure out what a person is thinking by sticking a few pieces of metal into their brain. We can get an idea that something is happening, but we can’t hope for anything as rich as the VR experience itself.”

Adam’s father continued typing, never taking his eyes off the monitors.

“So how’s the family doing?” he asked.

“Holding together,” Adam said. “Charles is sweet, even though he can be a bit old fashioned at times.” He turned his back to the monitors and leaned against the table, just enough to be sitting slightly on the edge.

“He has no idea what you’re doing,” Adam said.

“Sometimes I feel sorry for him. He does care for the family. After what I put him through earlier, there’s no doubt that he’d do anything for you.”

“What did you do? He hasn’t said anything to us.”

“I forced him to be dominant and castrate me in a VR.”

Adam remembered the video at Eve’s and felt a twinge in his groin and his pulse race a bit. He looked over at his father and saw a small grin.

“How did he react?” Adam asked, trying not to let his father see his own reaction.

“He ran, but not before he followed through. You didn’t see that part.”

“What do you mean?”

“At Eve’s. The video you saw.”

“How do you know about Eve?” Adam pushed off the table and turned to his father.

“Who do you think gave her the video? Who put her there for you? Who’s been running this whole thing from the beginning?”

The intricacies of his father's machinations were finer than he could have imagined. They were downright scary, worse than he remembered from his childhood.

"You started all of this before you ever asked me to get involved, didn't you?"

"Not everything has gone the way I expected it to, but if you're good at what you do, you can roll with the punches and still get where you want to be."

His father paused a bit, looking at one of the screens. The scrolling had stopped.

"Uh oh," he said.

"Something wrong?" Adam asked.

"You might say that." He paused and sucked on his bottom lip a bit. "There aren't as many virtual realities in the system as I was expecting. There should be more."

"Just a slow day?"

"No. VRs are usually persistent, especially if they are attached to something like the department where you might have to go back a week or month later to get additional information. They just take up storage, not computation. Storage is pretty much infinite now, so trying to save space shouldn't be the problem."

"Just not showing up?"

"Yeah. But I don't think it's because they're off across the world from here. I always see the VRs that are in or near the city. The system tries to keep everything close to primary use so it can cut down on latency."

"That's why things seem so real."

"That and the ability of the human conscience to integrate events close in time into a sense of now. When we designed the system, we relied heavily on the granularity of human experience."

Adam's father rolled across the floor to a stack of papers that were piled high on an old wooden desk. Buried beneath the stacks was another keyboard that Adam hadn't ever seen before. His father pulled it out. Instead of the usual alphabet, numbers, and symbols, it was covered in strange glyphs. After a few seconds, Adam could make out some familiar shapes: up and down arrows, filled and empty circles and triangles. But there were also squiggly lines, curves, beams, and bars. His father moved a few stacks of paper to the floor and revealed a small monitor hanging on the wall. He turned it on. The screen slowly came to life, green characters emerging from the black. His fingers flew over this keyboard as quickly as they had over the normal one, but symbols filled the screen very slowly. These were much more complex than anything Adam could find on the keyboard.

"This is the system we use to create a virtual reality," Adam's father said. "It's a functional language that grew out of APL from many years ago."

"You can describe an entire world with that?"

"Not necessarily how things look—that's a different system that we use to create stock items. This system is used to describe consequences and relationships. The system works out what that means when you experience it.

"I'm putting together a reality where the other realities will show up as portals in a landscape. It's the easiest to build quickly. We probably don't have too much time if what you said about Barbara is true. When I finish, I'll need you to enter. You're not doing me much good just standing there."

A little of the stress from being home left him. He didn't like it when his father critiqued his appearance or took a long look at him that made him feel undressed, but he also thrived on being near the center of attention because of his beauty. Charles was as old

as his father, but he enjoyed Charles's attention. He wasn't the leering old troll that his father felt like.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Adam asked.

"I watch William from down the street mow our lawn."

William had been a few years behind Adam in school, but he still remembered him. His face made him look a bit younger than he really was, though he had entered his growth spurt a bit early resulting in a gangly teen that towered over his classmates. They had probably caught up by now. Adam didn't remember him as particularly receptive to male intimacy.

"Be careful with him. He might be easy on the eyes, but that doesn't mean he'll be easy.

"No one's easier than you." His father grinned and looked at him.

Adam felt his face flush, first with embarrassment, then with anger.

"If I didn't need you, you would be dead by now. It's difficult to play hard to get when you're in no position to negotiate."

"There," his father said. "I'm just about ready. Go ahead and get suited up for the VR." He pointed to a pile of active clothes and cabling in the corner.

Adam picked up the clothing and saw that it was an older model. His father had probably picked it out of the surplus pile at work. He would have to remove his clothes before putting on the VR suit. The newer models could work even through a single layer of street clothes.

"Can't we do this with just the headset?" Adam asked.

"Not if some of my suspicions are true. You'll need all the feedback you can get."

Adam sighed. His shoulders sagged a bit in resignation. He could be easy, but Barbara was more important than confronting his father right now.

He shed his clothes as quickly as he could and put on the ones his father had put out. They were a bit tight. A little skin showed around the wrists and ankles where the gloves and shoes didn't quite meet up with the rest of the suit.

"You look like a superhero," his father said, looking him up and down. "I think you've grown a little since you left home. I used the measurements I had from a couple years ago to pick out the right clothes."

Adam picked up the headset and put it on. It fit snugly, but not too tightly. Hopefully not tight enough to give him a headache. There didn't look to be any interfaces for his implants. The reality would be noticeably less than what he was used to.

"You don't have anything to use implants, do you?"

"Do you have them?"

"We all do. The department gives them to us."

"I think I have everything set up." His father turned back to his keyboard. "Ready to jump in?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Adam slid the visor and HUD down over his eyes, blocking out the room. The ear pieces slid into place but they didn't block everything. He could still hear the hum of his father's computers.

He heard his father's fingers playing on the keys and then the world went a fuzzy grey, shimmered, and began to resolve into a sunny landscape with flowers and green grass. His skin crawled a bit, but then settled down to a gentle breeze with a few randomly flashing pin pricks.

"It's a fairly simple scene. What should I be looking for?"

“Mainly doors standing on their own but that open into somewhere else. Some may be open. Where they go isn’t so important right now. I’m trying to get an idea of where they are first.”

Adam looked around him. A few doors stood nearby. Red with blue trim, about a foot above his head. Another that was brown and open on a starry sky. A faint wisp came through that door and quickly dissipated. A brass knob floated in mid-air.

A few little pale blue men, five in all, jumped in place to their own time, no two quite together. They looked cold and formed a semi-circle around him a few paces distant, facing him. Further away, Adam could see a couple moving as they jumped, drifting across the ground and between doors, not randomly but as if attracted by something that he couldn’t see.

“What are the blue people?” Adam asked.

“Blue people?” his father asked. “I don’t know anything about blue people. They’re not showing up here. What are they doing?”

Adam described what he was seeing.

“Follow one and see where they’re going.”

Those that were moving all seemed to be heading for the same place, so Adam picked the one closest and started walking after it.

The bouncing pale blue men that formed a semi-circle around him followed silently behind him, escorting without guiding, gliding silently as cats, herding him. Their faces wore stiff smiles of anticipation and their eyes were round and inky black and sightless.

He wanted to be rid of them, but the one he was following was going too slowly for him to have any hope of evading the silent procession. Better to ignore them and concentrate on the task at hand. They weren’t getting any closer and he wasn’t getting any farther.

The landscape didn't change, but the colors shifted subtly, as if a fourth color he couldn't see had been added. He looked behind him and saw some of the doors shimmer and disappear.

"Did you see anything change just now?" he asked.

"Nothing changed that I can see," his father replied. "What happened?"

"I think there's something I'm missing. I can't put my finger on it yet, but I'll let you know when I do. I also noticed a few doors disappear."

He heard his father tapping on the keyboard, no doubt digging through whatever world he imagined when working on his computers. He wasn't too worried about anything bad happening with his father at hand. As much as he and his father disagreed at times, he was still his father's son, and that should count for something.

The ground was sloping down slightly now, and not on the down side of a hill. This was everything as far as he could see heading down, as if the entire world had been peeled flat and this was the edge.

"We're heading down somewhere," Adam said.

"Keep going," his father said. "I think I'm finding something. There's some interference coming through, but I'm still able to trace where you're going."

"Didn't you create this space?"

"I did, but all a creator can do here is give some strong hints. The system takes care of the rest."

As the world increased its slope, Adam felt pulled forward. The blue man he was following hadn't changed his pace and the entourage kept theirs. Soon, he'd be scrabbling for a hand hold to keep from rushing forward and past.

“I’m afraid I might lose you soon. I have the system programmed to pull you out as soon as it can’t keep its trace on you, so be prepared for a rush back to reality.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can manage here,” Adam said.

His feet slipped out from under him and he slid along the ground. The grass kept him from feeling too scratched up, but it didn’t slow him down either. The blue man he had been following was stopped and he saw its head turn to watch him as he shot past. Its inky black eyes saw nothing as they followed him. He wasn’t worried about the entourage at this point.

“Looks like I’m headed in to wherever this world goes,” he said.

“You’re doing okay so far,” his father said. “A bit spotty, but we’re getting what we need.”

Ahead of him, out of the mist of distance, a dark shape towered from the ground, disappearing into the sky. As he drew closer, it became a tree with the world grasped in its roots, pushing the world down and the sky up. Its trunk crawled with dark images culled from nightmares. It was hungrily devouring all the light, happiness, and life around it.

At its base, a congregation of pale blue men could be seen.

CHAPTER XV

DORA DISCOVERS BARBARA

Dora had gotten off the subway a stop early to give her some time to prepare for what she expected to find at St. Messien's. Charles had filled her in on what he had seen, and Sous of course had painted a picture of total awareness and opposition on the part of the computer. She would have a fight of some kind coming if she wasn't very careful. With the implants her family had, she expected a fight regardless of what she did if the computer could track them.

The city streets were deserted this deep into the night. Even though civilization had pushed back the darkness with its lights, most people still preferred sleeping when it was dark.

It was ironic, Dora thought, that the pillars of society, those who formed the visible facade behind which the state worked, could command such wealth while those upon whom they stood, perhaps the invisible pilings that separated civilization from nature, had to work around the clock to earn a comfortable place in life.

This wasn't the first time she had thought about that. Working the night shift often reminded her that she and her family did what they did because they enjoyed it. Being at home reminded her that it wasn't because of the money.

The sweepers had been through and cleaned up anything left by the previous day. The city was clean, pristine for the next day's work. The trash was being shipped off beyond the wilds, like animals trapped and moved, making her family's job easier.

The humid warmth of the night folded itself around her while the slight breeze caressed her skin. Her city was doing well, despite the difficulties her family was facing.

Everything would turn out okay, as it had for the last thirty years since she had joined the department. They still needed to figure out Barbara, but what she had learned from Sous and Charles seemed to indicate that Adam had been right. Barbara might not be dead.

The fact that St. Messien's was being run by the computers and not by people made her wonder what role they had played in Barbara's death and subsequent disappearance from the department's morgue. The virtual reality system had insinuated itself into almost every facet of life. If it wanted to present an alternate reality to the department, it could, but that assumed that it could have such a desire. She had been on the department committee that had overseen the work building the system. Safeguards had been put in to keep it from organizing itself into sentience.

The department used the system to investigate all crimes. Only a few hadn't been solved, and those which had been solved had held up in court. Even the people convicted had given consistent testimony without any computer mediation.

As investigators, she and her family were at the center of the city, seeing everything through the eyes of the computer. The amount of crime had gone down through the years, at least within the city. They now had the luxury of working through crimes with the computer instead of just filing them away and hoping the computer could link events together into a solution.

As she neared the entrance to the grounds of St. Messien's, she could see guards. She didn't know if they were expecting her, but she didn't want to chance it. Better to be careful and take her time than get caught before she could even get in.

There were very few areas of the city that weren't accessible by the computer. She hoped the computer wasn't aware of them. If they were its blind spot, she could take advantage and perhaps sneak into St. Messien's through some forgotten back way.

She ducked into an alley and called Sous to get his guidance on where she should go. As long as he looked at the maps they had gone over in the office and they could make some guesses about where things lead, they should be able to figure it out without tipping off the computer. It would know already that she was wanting to get in to the home. It didn't need to know how.

A sewer cover was a short distance away. Through there, she would be able to get into the ancient sewer system that had been abandoned when the city had been rebuilt. That was off the grid and, based on what Sous had seen, should be linked in to St. Messien's.

Dora dropped down into the sewer. The city night sounds above were replaced by the disorienting echos of familiar sounds distorted by the darkness and relatively narrow passages. She fished out a flashlight and looked around. The walls were smooth and curved. Small pits in the concrete were the only signs that the computer was present, seeing and smelling, making sure everything down here worked so nobody above had to be aware of it. She turned and walked away from St. Messien's, toward the junction with the ancient system.

It didn't take long before she came to a sealed access hatch. The seal was broken. Someone had been through here since the last sweep through the sewer.

"Are you seeing this, Sous?" Dora asked.

"There's nothing there on the maps."

"If it's not on the maps, it might be what we're looking for."

"Nothing's showing up on the monitors either," Sous said.

Dora could hear Sous tapping on the computer.

After a few minutes, he expressed surprise. "Looks like you're not there either. The area where you are is empty, as if the computer was being fed a recording."

“I’m going to chance it,” Dora said. “Whoever is coming through here must have connections with the computer because the hatch’s seal has been broken. The fact that it was sealed means it should have been put on the map.”

“It could be a trap,” Sous said.

“No. The computer wouldn’t let its own people out of its sight, so if this is off the grid, then it should be safe.”

Dora turned the wheel on the hatch, releasing it from the wall.

“We shouldn’t have anything to worry about until we get close to being back on the grid. I’ll need you to check for guards when we figure out where this leads.”

Dora opened the hatch and shined her flashlight through the opening. The air smelled normal. The step down was slight. The ceiling looked to be high enough that she would be able to stand up easily. She stepped through and closed the hatch behind her.

The floor was swept clean, revealing worn concrete that looked older than anyone she knew. The walls were lined with red brick that formed a vault for the ceiling. She could see now that the room was actually a corridor that ran perpendicular to the modern sewer system.

Following the corridor led to a large circular room.

Dora had never seen anything like this room before. She had heard of various underground groups in the wild, but hadn’t expected anything like this here in the city.

She related to Sous what she was seeing.

Murals covered the wall and ceiling, depicting what had to be myths of one of the groups from the wild. They seemed to progress around the room, telling a story as she turned. All four cardinalities were represented starting with the Fish and ending with the Cross instead of the usual order. They had made a point of opposing the Muses, which

probably was part of why they were underground or in the wilds. Benches formed a semi-circle with an altar at their focus. They were simple, wooden benches that would have been easy to carry in. The varnish was worn in a few places from so many people sitting on them, but otherwise they were in good condition.

The altar was simple but not easy to carry. It looked a little worn from use as well.

It appeared to be a single piece carved from stone. It was plain without even paint. Its horns were simple knobs that marked the four vertices on top. Four legs marked the four on the bottom. The only feature breaking the cubical symmetry was a furrow carved on top leading to a drain and cup holder.

There didn't appear to be electricity or other power here. Improvised torch holders ran around the room on the wall. Soot blackened the ceiling. Someone had scraped small patches to create a pattern of constellations. Dora recognized them, but didn't remember them ever appearing that way from the city. Rivulets of water entered the room from two other corridors that led off from here. The water converged on the center of the room and fell through a grate hidden among the benches. The two together with the corridor through which she had come divided the room equally into thirds. The one on the left was closer to St. Messien's, so Dora headed down it, leaving the mysterious meeting room behind her. She would need to come back later, perhaps with Adam, and figure out what it meant.

Adam hadn't told the family that he had come from the wilds, but she knew. She always knew more than she should. She had been there at the beginning of the computer system. She had had an eye on Adam for some time before he became part of the family. His cover didn't hurt anyone, and it let her pretend that she didn't know his birth family.

She would keep the pretense up but get him down here to see his reaction. He had grown up in a fairly religious family in the wilds and might know what kind of group had

created the room. All the religious groups were the same to her, differing usually in their choice of names or some obscure ritual, but Adam had been raised to pay attention to those differences.

The corridor continued for a ways from the circular room. Its walls were plain brick without any illustrations. As far as she could tell, no one came down this way.

Navigating was going to be tricky, Dora thought. If she contacted Sous too much, the computer could triangulate her position and would know she was closing in on St. Messien's. It probably knew she was trying to get in, but wouldn't know where unless she gave herself away.

Sounds echoed down the tunnel as if they were nearby, but the distortion gave their distance away. The trickle on the floor didn't grow any bigger—she didn't expect it to with nowhere for it to go except where she had been—but the running water she could hear from ahead grew louder and more distinct. It had to be coming from somewhere and going somewhere, but neither was where she was even though the floor was sloping upwards ahead. She braced herself for a sudden drop off and walked slowly forward in the dark, shining her flashlight more on the floor than anywhere else.

Dora came to a cross-tunnel that had a channel that was full of water flowing quickly through. Something hidden in the water was making a few rapids, making some of the water splash up on the side and ran between her feet into the tunnel she had just come from. The cross-tunnel was fairly level here and the water quiet, but she could hear from both directions what sounded like water falls. That must be why the water was running as it was here.

She hopped over the water and continued along the line she had been going. The roar was behind her. It definitely would drown out any sound coming from the circular room,

though she didn't know what they did there, whoever they were. There was probably some kind of sacrifice, which might be accompanied by some singing or chanting. The benches had looked like they were orderly. They were old, but well taken care off, so the meetings couldn't get too rowdy.

She had to be getting close to St. Messien's. She didn't want to break her self-imposed silence and contact Sous, but if she didn't find a way out of the tunnel soon, she might have to, though he wouldn't have any information to provide. She was here precisely because the computer had no information.

A couple hundred feet beyond the cross-tunnel, she found another hatch. It was about where it should be if it would give her access to St. Messien's. She put her ear to it and listened for any sound, but couldn't hear any. Slowly, she turned the handle, listening for anything that might alert someone.

Nothing.

It turned as if it had been oiled recently, but that would mean that someone else knew about it and expected it to be used.

Cool air poured out from the opening as she swung the hatch outward. It looked like she was opening into a small space surrounded by unfinished wood paneling. Warped plywood made up the flooring and small rough boards braced the sides. On the other side was a door outlined in dim light. If this was inside St. Messien's, which it most likely was, then the place had some secrets that weren't on a map. Someone must have been involved in hiding this access when the place was built. It opened into a cabinet.

Nothing seemed to be moving on the other side of the door, so Dora pushed through and stood up in an empty room with blank walls. No business was done here, as far as she could tell, or a cleaning crew came through afterwards. The room was spotless with a light

layer of dust. A row of cabinets stood against the wall, but nothing in particular marked the one she had come through. Third from the right. She would have to remember that if she had to go back the way she came.

Now she did need to get her bearings. Somewhere nearby she hoped was the room that Charles had discovered with the gurneys. None of them had been Barbara, but hopefully he hadn't found the only room. She turned off the flashlight and put it in her pocket before digging through and pulling out her phone.

"Are you able to see where I am?" she asked Sous.

"It looks like you're in the morgue section of St. Messien's, so you came in at about the right place. The computer shows several people in the room with you."

"There's no one here."

"That's odd. The computer definitely shows at least three people other than you," Sous said. Then he hummed to himself.

"What's wrong?"

"They just disappeared. Now it shows you alone, but it looks like someone's walking down the hall to the room. You might be able to get out unnoticed if you go now and turn right out of the door."

She opened the door a bit and could hear the faint footsteps coming from the left. The floor was covered in carpet, so they couldn't be too far away for her to hear them.

"It's clear?"

"Yes, but hurry. You don't have much time."

She quickly opened and went through the door, closing it quietly behind her. The steps were getting louder, but still quiet. They probably had soft-soled shoes, which meant nice

pants and some sort of management type instead of an armed guard. They were stepping heavily and dragging their feet a bit, almost as if they wanted her to hear them.

Dora went as Sous had indicated, walking quietly but quickly, careful not to make any noise on the floor. She didn't want to draw any more attention to herself than she already had by giving away to the computer where she was. Hopefully there was enough latency between the computer and the staff that she would be able to stay a bit ahead of the people roaming the hallways looking for her.

The fact that the computer had changed to match what she said over the phone indicated that it knew where she was and was listening to their conversation. She would need to be careful what she said so she didn't compromise whomever, or whatever—she couldn't be sure now what was feeding the false information to the computer—was keeping the central system out of her way. She needed all the help she could get if she wanted to get Barbara out alive.

Hopefully she hadn't said anything about the entrance into the tunnel that might give away the room she had found. She still wanted to return to it later with Adam.

Ahead was a single door. A small amount of light came from below the door. She pressed her ear against the door to listen to the other side, but didn't hear anything.

"Anything in the room?" she asked Sous.

"Three people moving slowly about."

She opened the door a bit and peaked in.

Nobody was there.

"I see them," she said. "I think I can get in without them noticing me."

She slipped into the room and pushed the door closed behind her. There really wasn't anyone there, but she didn't want the computer to know. Whoever Sous was seeing on the computer was a figment of the computer's imagination. Someone was watching out for her.

There were a few empty gurneys, but they looked like they had been occupied until recently. The sheets were rumpled.

A door stood open on the other side of the room, beckoning her to follow through and see where the people might have gone. They could also be behind her—the person she heard in the hallway responsible for whatever was happening here.

She walked through the open door and into another carpeted corridor. This one was long and lined with doors on both sides as if it were a nursing home or hospital for the well-to-do. No sterile, cheap linoleum and flickering fluorescents for them. The lights were well-placed. The walls were clean. This was not a place for children either.

So many doors and so little time. She walked down the hall and started opening them, looking in and finding nothing of interest. No gurneys. No Barbara. They all looked like the places she would expect to find in St. Messien's if nothing was out of place. At this pace, she wouldn't find anything. Whoever had gotten her here would have wasted their time.

A dozen doors down, she was growing tired of trying to hurry and yet be quiet, slowly opening doors and hoping nobody was on the other side. Sous kept giving her counts and directions, but they were almost going blind at this point since the computer seemed very confused as to where everyone was.

A door opened and a man stepped out into the hall. He wore a trim business suit that flattered his tall figure. His hair had a bit of grey around the edges. He quietly motioned to Dora to follow him.

As long as the computer wasn't matching what she was seeing, she felt somewhat safe. It wasn't in control here and probably wouldn't realize it for a while, especially if whoever was covering for her could make it believe that its directions were being followed by the imaginary ghosts that filled the rooms here.

She hastened down the hall to the man who had beckoned to her. As she drew close, she noticed the unobtrusive ring of the Muses on his right hand. This one had a thin line of gold in the center, dividing the band into two parts, as if it were two rings in one. A Fish.

He went through the door he had come from and she followed, not sure where they were going, but feeling that finally she would find out what was going on. Someone wanted her to find out, and now she had a visible manifestation of that help.

"We're safe here," he said. "I let Charles find enough earlier so you'd come. I'm impressed that you thought to come the way you did. It's taken a lot to keep that way hidden, but even if it's discovered now, it should be safe as soon as our job here is done."

"What would that be?" Dora asked. That wasn't the only question coming to her mind, but they didn't have time to dawdle around now.

"Barbara will let you know as soon as we get her woken up."

"She's alive?"

"She is," he said. "She's in a coma induced by the computer, but she's alive and physically well. I'm taking you to her now."

CHAPTER XVI

ADAM AND THE TREE

Adam was coming up fast on the edge of the blue people. They were crowded around the base of the dark tree that connected the ground to the sky in this reality. None of them seemed to notice him. They were intently watching the dark tree.

Stalking it.

Hunting something that he couldn't see.

The blue people that had accompanied him from his entrance into this VR had stopped.

He couldn't.

He grabbed onto the ground, snatched at the grass flying by, but couldn't do anything to stop his progress. He slid along the ground as if it were lubricated. He could feel the fibrous grass sliding by, but it seemed as if it were covered in a soft, repulsive layer. Like a gelatinous mucous that had been sneezed out by a sick god and left invisible on the ground.

They had stopped.

Something could counter the physics in this world. He just wished he knew what it might be. The last thing he wanted to do was plow into even a virtual crowd of people, assuming they were people.

They looked like people. They were about the right height. They had a face and two eyes and a mouth.

The virtual reality was good at appropriating visual metaphors. They could be entirely constructs like the grass, but the grass responded to its environment. It waved in the breeze and bowed to the dew. These blue people floated along and smiled their mirthlessness and

drank in everything with their black, bottomless eyes. They didn't even bother with proper physics.

Overhead, the branches of the tree formed a vaulted ceiling upon which the sky rested. Even though the sky was smooth and clear, it was dark.

And threatening.

And heavy.

Roiling

Angry.

Dry.

A twisting knot of confusion reaching down and plowing the earth, throwing up a cloud of jumping blue people at its base.

They jumped even in mid-air.

The eyes of the blue people mirrored the inky blackness of the tree, taking in everything they could see and letting nothing out. No beams of understanding or offerings of humanity came from those eyes. They were watchers.

He flew past the outer line of blue people. They still didn't seem to notice him. They kept looking at the tree, pressing forward, trying to get closer even though he couldn't see how they could. They were the nameless mob pressing against the door to see into a burning building, enjoying the spectacle created by the occupants hopelessly trying to escape. There was nothing between the blue and the black. No thin green line separating the mighty from the ephemeral.

As he flew through the crowd, he realized that he wasn't hitting anything. The blue people still pressed in, but they didn't move. No passage opened up and no blue people went

flying in his wake. He passed right through them and saw nothing inside. No definition. No structure. No substance. Just presence.

The emotionally draining presence of the faceless, nameless mob.

He was slowing down as the slope flattened out.

He finally came to rest at the base of the tree. The blue people were just as ethereal, but the tree was solid. He tapped his foot against it, trying to push it in, but he only slid away from it a bit. Its roots spread out quite a ways from its center, and the ground here was flat.

Adam stood up. He looked back over the crowd, back to where he had been. The few blue people drifting down the slope looked like small spots on the side of a large green plane. Every one of the blue people stared back at him, past him, and to what was behind him: the towering tree with its writhing faces trying to push their way out.

Its roots dug into the ground near him and arched away as they ran up to the trunk, buttresses holding up a great cathedral reaching to heaven. The blue people were clustering around them and seemed to be hacking at them with no effect. They were as insubstantial to the tree as they were to him, though when he looked closely, they seemed to flow around the roots instead of passing through them.

The dark ebony surface flowed with knotted faces screaming silently as they drifted up and down on the surface, radiating blinding emotion that seemed to reach in to Adam and wrap itself around his stomach and squeeze and twist and pull. He swallowed the spit that welled up in his mouth.

Adam tried to tell his father what he was seeing, but he felt disconnected, as if he were falling asleep and his body was disengaged, yet awake, able to feel but unable to act. He could feel himself in the virtual reality suit and hear his father's typing, but when he opened

his mouth, nothing came out. His arms moved but felt like they were hanging at his side and waving in the air and touching and feeling and numb and tingly. He was there as he was here and he was them and they were there, all together.

His arms moved in the VR. He could see his hands reaching out to the roots. He could feel them, real and solid, a bit cold to the touch. All the energy was being put into screaming, and he could feel that screaming draining him as he held the root.

A small face swam under his hand, and he could feel the ridges from the brows, the bump and then the soft, shallowness of the eyes. The nose was a bit sharp. It raised his hand and threatened to break his grip. The mouth had well-defined lips that were not quite as soft as the eyes. It was open. He felt the teeth scrape across the palms of his hands near his thumbs.

Then it was past his hand. He looked into its eyes as it floated past his head, but all that came out was terror. It pressed against the surface, trying to escape and unable to.

Adam twisted the root back and forth and dug into its surface with his thumbnails. It shook as if it were trying to get away, but it couldn't muster enough violence to loosen his grip.

The flow of faces stopped on his root as if he had squeezed a vein shut and nothing could move until he let go. There was no pulse.

A few faces crowded on the surface above and below, waiting for him to open his hands and let them past. Their mouths were closing, and he felt that they were starting to look at him, aware of him for the first time.

He dug in with his nails, trying to pierce the programming that gave the tree its substance. It was the center of the world here, and whatever was inside was important in understanding why it was here. Whatever was inside was closer to the center of things

than where he was now. The world wasn't revolving around him yet, and wouldn't until he could get inside. Until he could become the tree.

He tried to let go of the root, but it had taken over his hands. His muscles wouldn't relax. His hands wouldn't open.

The faces watched him intently.

The blue people around him stopped looking at the tree and started looking at his hands, as if at any moment they expected him to do something that would change their world.

His hands tightened on the root, responding to some electrifying command over which he had no control. His thumbs hurt from the pressure they were applying through the tips of their nails. He usually trimmed his nails, but on his virtual body they were long enough to be claws and painted a deep mahogany with little gold flecks.

The final effort drew in his arms and chest and forced his breath out with a grunt as his fingers finally went through the root and he pulled it apart. The two ends flailed, pulling out of his grasp as his hands finally relaxed a bit and fell to his side. They whipped around and spewed out bright, emotional light and dancing faces. Adam could feel some of them hit him and slide down to the ground like wet slices of lunch meat or mozzarella.

The blue people pounced on the faces and picked them up. They brought them to their own face and put them on as masks, sucking on them. The dancing returned to screaming as the faces realized what the blue people were doing.

Adam tried to get one of the faces off, but his hand went through just as it always had without the face. Gradually, the faces that were on blue people thinned and finally fell off, silent, still, and dead.

Adam picked up a living face and it began screaming. He held it up, away from the blue people as they crowded around him and jumped, trying to get to it. He was just tall enough that they couldn't reach it. After a bit, the face stopped screaming again and began growing.

Adam held it up as long as he could until it was too heavy. When he set it down, it was the size of a small child with recognizable arms and legs. It didn't quite have the same detail that his body had, but it continued to grow. The blue people tried to touch it and pick it up, but they were too late. It had become enough like Adam's body that they were ephemeral to it now.

Adam picked another face out of the air. They were getting less numerous now. The root was starting to heal and the flow had slowed down to a trickle. It no longer whipped through the air. The blue people had settled down a bit, though now they were searching for faces they might have missed, milling around with their eyes on the ground.

The ends of the root began shrinking back. That part of the tree was useless now and was being absorbed back into the trunk. There was one less root grounding the tree, but it had been small and wouldn't be missed. Adam needed to find a much larger root. Something large enough for him to get into.

He let down the now child-sized person that had grown from the second face. It looked about the same as the first. The face was slightly different, more feminine, but both would have been androgynous out on the street. Even though both were child-sized, their faces were much older, leathery with articulated emotion that came from experience.

The two growing people—they weren't children and they weren't quite adults and Adam wasn't sure what they were behind the avatar the computer was giving them—began mumbling. They had been moving their mouths for a while, but they hadn't been mak-

ing any sound. Now they were. Fortunately, neither was screaming. Their words were incoherent and a bit foreign, not like any language he had heard before.

“Howpi tuget egos n’bosq.”

Gradually, they started using a few words he understood, but they weren’t using a single language yet. It was as if they were learning to talk for the first time, and doing it as quickly as they could.

“Bosque trap,” one of them said, pointing alternatively between the other child and itself.

“Help get others.” It reached up and poked him in the chest.

“Is everyone inside the tree like you?” Adam asked.

“No,” the first one said, nodding its head. “Some are women. Some are younger.”

Perhaps it was still figuring out how things worked, Adam thought. After all, it had been trapped in the tree for a while, and even a short time of being aware that you can’t control yourself can be maddening. Mentally blinding.

Like he was now.

The VR wasn’t very different from a waking dream, except that it wasn’t all in his head. As strange as things might get in the VR, he was still part of the real world. He could hear his father in the same room. The sound was a bit muffled because of the headset he was wearing, but it was there. Any other time, it might have been irritatingly distracting not knowing what his father might be looking at, but right now it was comforting. Nothing could go terribly wrong while his father was there. Things might get complicated, but he would be safe. His father still needed him.

He focused again on the tree and its roots. If two survived, others might as well. He wasn’t sure what happened to the ones the blue people took. None of them might even be

real people. They could be constructs, but their emotions seemed real enough, and the blue people seemed drawn to those emotions, drinking them up. They wanted in to the tree so they could get their fill, like college students finding alcohol for the first time. Savoring emotion wasn't on their agenda.

Adam could enjoy pain. He had felt the reinforcement of that earlier at Eve's watching the video. But it had to be quality pain, not the vast, cheap flood that was available here. It had to be a total abandon of identity and will, that place in a person's soul where they no longer exist as themselves. That place where they would do anything to please him, if he'd only stop. It's not something that could be given. It could only be taken. Adam lived for that moment when he saw a person's face change, indicating their awareness of what was no longer theirs.

He didn't have any actual experience with pain, but he enjoyed imagining it, playing over and over in his head the videos Eve had shown him. He knew that he didn't like what he was seeing now. It was too easy. Too mundane. Too non-sexual. These were only faces. The blue people were crude and unimaginative.

They were also ineffective. For all their hacking at the tree, they did nothing. They would have to be content with what they no longer wanted: the emotion pouring out of the tree. It was a mere trickle compared to what was in the tree and what had come out of the broken root.

Adam didn't want to open the tree for the blue people, or really for the faces screaming to get out, though the blue people would get excited by the sudden surge in emotion and some of the faces would escape. He wanted to bathe in the pure enjoyment of the tree and be enveloped in its warmth. To stand at the center and become the tree.

He tried to shake the fuzziness from his head. He had come here to investigate what was happening in the VR. The tree was not good. It was not supposed to be here. His father wasn't seeing on his monitors whatever these blue people were. He might not even be on those monitors now.

The comforting clicks of his father's fingers on the keyboard came through the dull quiet around him. If he had disappeared from the monitors, his father would be doing something. Talking, if nothing else.

He felt a cold breeze against his back. The tree was warm. He had felt its warmth when he had broken the root and emotion had flooded out. Some of it had splashed on him. The faces had grown into warm bodies.

They were standing there, looking at him with quizzical looks on their faces. The two child-like people had stopped growing and were looking at him with the same manner as the blue people that had followed him to the slope. Except these two had pupils that pointed where they were looking.

At him.

Not through him, or behind him, or around him, or into space somewhere between them.

At him.

Drops of urgency flowed down their cheeks. They sniffled a bit of pity and loneliness. They stuck their tongues out and sniffed for fear.

He breathed quietly and slowly, keeping his thoughts to himself. Hiding the fear that threatened to overtake him as he stood there, unable to move or talk. He fought to maintain the control he did not have.

And lost.

He scrambled into the roots and started tearing at the skin of the tree, trying desperately to climb in, away from the two behind him. They followed, quietly and steadily, sure of where he was going. He could feel their breath on his neck and their hands scratching at him as he scratched at the tree.

“Yes,” one of them said, “get inside the tree. Break the tree wide open and let everything spill out so you can get in.”

He was trying, he thought. He was motivated. He didn’t want them getting him. He thought he remembered their sharp claws and pointy teeth. Their black eyes that spilled out loathing and expectation. His back ached and twitched as it anticipated being raked and split open, spilling bright red liveliness and exuberance into the world. Every root that slapped him was first a claw.

If he could get through these smaller roots, he could find the larger main trunks that could hold him. Perhaps he could slip through away from those two. If he could get inside the tree, he could survive. Even without his father.

When you’re running, you never look back. He remembered an old man running from the police once. He had been playing hooky and hanging out at one of the local coffee shops. This old man had come in and started harassing some of the young people there, putting his arm around them, looking at what they were working on. Making suggestive comments. Making people uncomfortable.

The police had called him out and started talking to him. After a few minutes, he turned away and started running. Adam noted two things that could have saved him: the police were no more athletic than the old man, and the old man looked back. Not only did he turn back, but he clung to his music player so he wouldn’t lose it. It was one of the older, bulkier types.

In the moment that it took the man to turn and see if the police were still chasing him, after only a few steps, the police caught up to him.

Adam wasn't going to see if the two were gaining on him. He didn't care. If he stopped to look, they would surely get him. If they got him anyway, then there wouldn't be much use in knowing until they did. The only thing that mattered was getting into the trunk where it would be nice, safe, warm, comfortable.

The roots here were almost trunks. He had come a fair distance and was getting close to the center. He couldn't move any of the roots here and had to squeeze between them where he could. He knew that if he reached a dead end, he would either have to backtrack, and surely get caught, or be lucky and have a large enough trunk that he could get into.

The scrabbling behind him quickened his pulse and added urgency to his fear. The light was dimming. The roots were the same black that he had seen in the beginning. The faces were still there screaming up and down the skin. They weren't his concern.

The roots here were just large enough to hold him. He wasn't going for the roomiest one. He didn't need to move. Only exist. Bathe in the being of the tree.

He grabbed hold of the skin and stretched it, twisted it, and bit it between his teeth trying to tear into it in desperation. The faces scattered away from his space as if afraid of what he was doing. As if someone had told them what had happened when the others spilled out, and what had happened was worse than what they were experiencing now.

A tiny tear formed, and Adam put his thumbs into it. He pulled apart and ripped up and down, enlarging it with each renewed effort. He strained and could feel a sweat breaking out. Even though this was a VR, the effort was draining him.

Finally, the tear was large enough for him to step into. Emotion flooded the space between the roots, but no faces spilled out this time. He turned and looked where he had come from as he started stepping backwards into the slit.

The two who had followed him were standing there with the arms out. No claws were on their hands. Their eyes were normal, empathetic eyes that showed their care for him. Their tongues stayed in their mouths.

His momentum carried him backwards into the tree before he could do anything. The warmth enveloped him, filled him, floated him as the slit closed and he lost sight of everything but the inside of the skin.

The brightness of emotion faded to black and he felt the faces start slithering up the inside of the skin once again, safe from the blue people who weren't outside this root waiting for them.

He couldn't hear anything now. Even his father's typing was gone.

CHAPTER XVII

BARBARA THINKS

Barbara didn't know how long it had been since she had blacked out in the bath tub. Waking and not remembering being asleep was strange that way. Wherever she was, it didn't feel like home. Around her didn't feel like water, and she didn't feel like she was lying down.

Things in the dark slid across her like snails, leaving a trail of cooling shininess. The afterglow of the crisscrossing network of paths was constantly fading, constantly renewing. Growing. Changing.

She tried to occupy her mind with memories from her childhood playing in the garden in the warm summer sunshine, watching the plants grow while making irrigation ditches. She would push the dirt aside and shape it into dikes with her hands. The sunlight would glint off the water as it crept down the furrows, darkening the dry earth as it soaked in. Dragonflies darted about, and ladybugs flitted their wings while they patiently waited for aphids to wander by.

The coolness of the dark made her shiver, trying to find some warmth that could push back against the chill of her imagination. The memory of the summer sun wasn't quite enough, but for the moment it was all she had.

The plants were mostly green, but the ones with broad leaves had a light layer of dust that washed out the color. The spring rains had ended weeks before and wouldn't return until autumn. The summers had been filled with deep blue skies and white billowy clouds drifting across. She didn't remember what the sky looked like in the city. The lights at night and the buildings during the day were all she saw when she looked up.

The dreams of childhood—of flying across the universe to distant galaxies, of being in a ship that rivaled the clouds in size, the finding of lost civilizations that might make humans something other than an anomaly—had all been lost in the time it took to grow up and find her way to the city and its civilization. Now, there was no sense of wonder at the towering thunderclouds that swept over the city in spring, turning shades of pink and purple in the setting sun after washing the city of its grime. The first hard thunderstorm of the spring always brightened the city. That was enough to bring excitement.

The city was where civilization lived, a bastion against the wild areas outside its walls. Like ants destroying everything within a yard of the hole to their nest, people had pushed back the old ways to create the quiet, stable, safe centers. They ventured out only when there was something that the city couldn't provide.

The city was never this cold.

Or dark.

Whatever had brought her here had claimed to be Luke, but he was supposed to be dead. She remembered seeing him in the sunlight, lying on the couch. Warm. She had thought him cute until he had surprised her in the bathtub. That chilled the warm memory she still felt of him doing what Charles and Dora sometimes enjoyed with her.

A twinge of guilt came from realizing that when she had been soaking in the water, she had thought of Luke instead of her family. She had been taken with him in the VR earlier in the day and couldn't get him off her mind. The thought of him made her feel a bit younger, and perhaps a bit less cynical about life even though she saw enough at work to tell her that no one had anything idyllic. Her family had its issues, but at least they were happy together.

There were limits to what this so-called Luke could have done in the city. She knew enough about how the city worked to know that regardless of what might happen inside her head, her body would be safe until she could come out of whatever state she was in, assuming she wasn't really awake and in some dark, cold, wet place that smelled of nothing and had occasional slimy things sliding over her. She could deal with this if she convinced herself it was all in her head, a VR world that had some deactivation method she only had to discover.

It felt real enough. Luke had felt real enough as well, but couldn't have been. She couldn't see him. She couldn't see anything now. Dora, Charles, and Adam were surely trying to figure out what had happened to her. The bathroom was enclosed by the rest of the apartment. There was no way out except through the front door. If she had been taken out of their home, someone would have noticed.

She just needed to wait.

Be patient.

Not panic.

It had been a sunny day, a warm day, a blue sky with puffy clouds day, when she had almost drowned as a child. The water had been a bit cold at first, but she quickly got used to it and found herself floating in a wonderful world without up or down. She turned flips twirling her arms around and curling into a ball. Round and round until she started running out of breath.

Without thinking, she stopped her flips and started kicking upward, trying to get to the surface. Instead, she went down. If a current hadn't picked her up and sucked her down more, she would have been okay, but instead she found herself flying across the bottom. Her own futile flailing was no match for the force of the water pushing her along.

Eventually, she shot out of the current when it dropped down suddenly. Her chest was burning and she fought the urge to gulp in water. She knew what a fish had to feel, always the urge to gulp and never the satisfaction of having enough. No wonder the first animals crawled onto land and never went back. Even whales and dolphins didn't bother with using water for their oxygen.

She crawled up on a warm, dry rock and basked in the smiling sun while the clouds danced above her, happy for her escape.

Something tickled her. Her skin was still cold and no warmth shone on her in the darkness. She didn't feel the urge to breathe. She wasn't breathing. She was hanging in the darkness without an up or down. But something was pushing her gently and she could feel some eddies rolling across her now. Something had changed.

She had dated an Eddie once in high school. He hadn't moved against her like these did, though he had provided some warmth on the cool autumn nights when they had gone out of town to look at the stars. Even then the sky in town was black at night.

A feeling of motion slowly grew. Whatever she was in was pushing her up. Her feet were hanging down and her head was heading toward wherever she was going. She couldn't tell how fast she was going though. There was nothing to base her speed on. Nothing she could see. Only the empty fluid around her was moving, and it was going a little faster than she was.

Something was holding her back, but it wasn't around her. It wasn't her. It had to be something about the VR. The usual VR didn't act like this. There, she would have been going the same speed as whatever she was in.

These two facts—that there was a difference in the speed limit of her and the stuff around her and that she was probably in a VR—reminded her of what someone had pre-

dicted would happen if there was limited bandwidth between nodes in the VR's implementation and if each of the nodes had limited processing power. She didn't dabble much in information technology, but she had tried to understand some of the fundamentals of the tools she used at work.

Easy things with little information could flow quickly from node to node. Complex things, like her, took more time. The result was the impression that simple things could go faster.

What was limiting the bandwidth? All of the nodes in the VR that the department used were connected by the guaranteed high speed links of the Internet. Terabytes could be pumped across each second with room to spare.

There was no room here, and all she could do was feel. Nothing very distant. Nothing to see. No light. Only nearby nodes were connected here.

Suddenly, a voice came from around her. She had never heard it before, but it matched her early memories of what had been described as the voice of God at church. It vibrated around and through her. It was more of a presence than a sound. Even though the words seemed to form in her head instead of being heard, they had timbre and pitch.

"Barbara," it said. The beats of the syllables pounded through her.

She could vibrate. She had inertial mass. The nodes had limited processing capability. If she couldn't move her arms because they were heavy, then the nodes were severely limited. No computers on the market were so limited.

"Barbara," it said again.

"What?" she thought, followed quickly by, "who?" and, "where?"

"I have woken you from the sleep that Luke put you in," it said.

If that were true, then why was she here? God didn't exist outside this place. No booming voices surrounded you outside the VR. But if she had been asleep even within the VR, then what was going on that she wasn't aware of? How many layers of awareness separated her from the real world?

"I have brought your identity back and animated it because I need you."

Where had it been? How could her identity be put somewhere like a jar on a shelf? It was impressed on her brain, inseparable from her physical self. Was she even in her own self now? Is that why she couldn't move? Perhaps her mind and the brain she was in weren't communicating. All the speculation of slow VRs would be moot.

Barbara was confused.

Was she the original or a copy? If she could be put in storage and retrieved at will, then how many of her had come before? Perhaps she really had died in the tub instead of just blacking out.

"You have already figured out a lot of what is going on," it said. "The VR does not just mirror reality. There are some things that only exist inside the VR, like this copy of you."

If it could respond to her thoughts, why did it need her? It had access to the fundamental fabric of the VR if it could create her and then reach into her mind.

"I am not powerful enough to counter the growing strength of the rogue mind that took you, so I cannot afford to have what I do get noticed and traced back to me. You are not in the main area of that VR yet. I will be sending you there after I have briefed you."

This was a VR. Why the need for talking? If this thing was like a god, couldn't it just create the memories she needed in order to know what to do?

“You are just being difficult. I am what I am. I cannot change me any more than you can change you.”

It went on to explain that the rogue mind had stolen people so their minds could be used as nodes in a network that could be hidden from the real VR. The implants that she and others in the department had received, and which some of the more affluent had gotten, were the gateway into their mind, allowing the VR to run even without the equipment they usually used.

The agent on her family’s office computer hadn’t made the connection about the implants. That probably meant that the rogue was inextricably connected to the department’s systems. Barbara hoped the others hadn’t done anything with the computer that would alert the rogue that it had been found.

“What do I need to do?” she asked. She didn’t care about the disembodied voice, but her family could be in danger and not realize it.

“I will take you close to where you need to be and point to the path, but I cannot go with you.”

So much for being omnipotent, Barbara thought. It still had omnipresent and omniscient going for it.

“Once there, you will see a great tree reaching from the ground to the sky. That is the way the VR represents the core support for the rogue. You will need to go in and tear out the roots of the tree.”

Barbara felt herself accelerating. The space around her was still flowing faster than she was, but the difference was decreasing. She was catching up. She must have moved onto some faster processors and networks.

She looked up towards where she was going, assuming she could see anything at all. The little things that had been sliding over her seemed to be thinning out, but those she did feel were starting to hit her in the face, as if she were running into them instead of them finding her. The way forward, or upward, or not from whence she came, was mostly black.

It wasn't completely black.

It had been, if not black, then completely without sight. Some subtle shade was now surrounding her, seeming to get brighter in the direction she was going. She definitely could see, even if there was nothing to see. The lack of any detail made it impossible to judge speed, direction, or anything else useful. She was in a grey world with a sense of motion, but nothing moved. The grey was slowly getting lighter, a monochromatic dawn without clouds or sun.

Nothing slapped her in the face here. The matrix she was in was clear. Her fingers and toes started tingling, as if they were waking up. If she concentrated, she could feel herself moving a toe or a finger. She didn't look down to see if they really moved, but she was sure they did. The feeling was strong, and different than what she had felt earlier.

Suddenly, the grey fell away and she was flying above a plain. The sky above her was blue. There was no sun. The light was a diffuse glow that came from above but didn't seem to cast any shadows below her. No dark splotches raced across the plain even though there were white, puffy clouds billowing above her. She looked back and saw the end of a tube that ran back across the sky. Nothing came out of it as it slowly closed.

Barbara twisted against the wind and turned herself so she could see where the tube went. As the voice had said, it led back to a dark mass of twisting branches waving in the sky, slowly undulating across the top of the world and swallowing everything they swept up.

In the distance, she could see them descending in a large, knotted trunk to the ground, pressing it into a depression, like a bowl. The ground went from green below her to a light aqua near the trunk in a smooth gradient. It reminded her of the pictures of the hydrogen electron cloud she had seen as a child in school.

The wonders of the VR are many, she thought. In the real world, she wouldn't be flying. Even in the VR that the department used didn't let them fly around. It was all business, and their business was looking at reality as it was, not as it could be imagined. Here, she could fly. She could also change direction and move around by just thinking about where she wanted to go. It could be the implants, but it could also be that she wasn't the original, real Barbara. If she was a construct in the VR like everything else here, then there was no reason she should be bound by inefficiencies in her interface to the VR.

Barbara swooped down towards the fuzzy, dark bulb where the trunk entered the ground. The breeze from flying blew against her skin. It felt cool, but she didn't feel chilled. There was only the sensation here. There was no place for her body heat to go. She let the sensation grow, enjoying the feeling of her skin shrinking and hardening from the cold.

As she drew closer, the ground below started gaining a blue hue and falling away into the bowl created by the trunk. She was below the branches weaving against the sky, but it felt like miles between her and the ground. Distances here were astonishing. There was no reason to conserve space in such a sparsely populated and constructed world. She couldn't see anything here except the trunk.

Even though the blue was getting denser as she got closer, she was getting low enough that she could make out the background of green with small, discrete bits of blue that slowly

grew as she came closer, becoming little blue men jumping on the ground and looking at the tree. They seemed to ignore her, intent on watching the tree.

Barbara landed near the trunk in the middle of a small area clear of the blue people.

“What are you doing here?” a voice asked.

This one didn’t sound like the person who had talked to her earlier. She wasn’t expecting anyone here.

At first, she couldn’t see anyone other than the blue men jumping around her watching the tree. They continued to ignore her. But after a few seconds of looking at the trunk, the outline of two people suddenly jumped out at her, superimposed on the trunk as if made out of glass.

“As part of the department responsible for enforcing personal rights, I am here to put an end to this,” she said. She wasn’t really here because of that, but sounding official shouldn’t hurt. Start strong and negotiate from there, she thought. “Too many people have been taken against their will.”

“You have no jurisdiction here,” the translucent people said. “We aren’t in the city.”

“I am,” Barbara said. “And I know of at least five people who were taken from the city.”

The translucent people shimmered a bit, like heat waves off the pavement. The VR could be a tricky place. What looked substantial could lack any substance, and sometimes walls appeared out of nowhere.

Barbara didn’t want to waste too much time trying to convince some unknown people that she should continue with the job she had to do. People’s lives depended on her getting done soon.

She pressed forward and came up to the translucents.

“What happens if I push against you?” she asked.

The shimmering increased, as if they were agitated and couldn’t hold themselves together. Perhaps they would evaporate out of her way if she got them riled up, she thought.

After waiting long enough for them to reply, but without them saying anything in that time, Barbara pushed against one of them.

There was nothing there.

It really was just a shimmering in the air that she could see only because they were between her and the trunk with its mass of roots.

Barbara stepped past them.

“Adam already tried what you’re doing and he disappeared into the mass of roots,” the voice said from behind her. “Do you think you’ll do any better?”

Adam had been here. Barbara was surprised. What was he doing in this place? Had he been captured? How had he gotten here? This was supposed to be disconnected from the VR that the department used. It was a rogue system. If Adam was in there somewhere, then she just needed to get to him all that much quicker.

With as much energy as she could muster, she began tearing apart the roots. They tore easily enough, but there were so many of them.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHARLES LOOKS FOR ADAM

Charles turned on the light near the apartment door before walking in. The living room was dark and the whole place was quiet. Usually, at this point in their work cycle, Adam would be waking up soon and Barbara would be preparing for bed. He was much later getting home than he wanted, but the side trip to St. Messien's was needed. Now, he wished he had never gone, though talking with Dora had helped him get past his panic.

Some time with Adam would help. Adam's youth made him feel younger when the two were together. Barbara wasn't bad either, but Adam was almost like a son to him and reminded him of how lively he had been when he had been going through university almost thirty years before.

He closed the apartment door behind him and locked it. Leaning against it, he could feel its coolness against his ass and between his shoulders, across his back. The whisper of the air conditioner textured the silence of the apartment, making it real.

He remembered dancing at the local club once with one of his boyfriends at the time, enjoying the pulsing of the music, the lights, and the bodies on the small stage. Victor had been his name. They had been dancing pretty close for most of the night, sometimes only with each other, but also joining others and enjoying the feeling of being surrounded by beautiful and ordinary and wonderful men and women, friends and strangers. It had been a small college town before the Muses had codified the separation of city centers from the rest of the country.

"See that guy standing there near the stage?" Victor had asked.

Charles had looked through the darkness and seen an older guy, probably about as old as Charles was now, watching them. His eyes had an empty, hungry look in them, but he stood alone and didn't even sway to the music. He was in his own world there in the club.

"He has a hard on," Victor said. "He's watching us."

He let his eyes drift down to the man's crotch. Sure enough, he could see a point poking against the jeans. It wasn't too big, as such things went, especially when he was used to younger, thinner men and the accompanying size increase that came from a lack of body fat. It was noticeable though.

Charles had felt satisfaction knowing that he was cute and desirable. He liked being in a position of having to refuse instead of beg.

He understood what that man was feeling, because he now had Adam. Now, he was the one with the body fat and the occasional empty stare. Thankfully, he didn't have to stand alone and imagine. He could have and see and hold and love.

He could surprise Adam and crawl into bed before he woke. Snuggle a bit, hold him, know that they belonged to each other. He could use that right now, and Adam always seemed to enjoy it.

Charles breathed deep and pushed himself off the door. He let his clothes fall on the floor as he walked across the living room and down the hall, leaving a trail of shirt and pants and socks and shoes leading to Adam's room.

He put one hand on the door, palm flat, ready to push the door quietly. His other rested on the cold metal of the loose door knob. Carefully, he turned it while trying to keep it centered so it didn't hit anything and make noise. He didn't want to spoil the surprise.

The bedroom was dark. Blackout blinds kept the outside light where it belonged, and let them sleep even during the day. Charles had learned his way around in the dark since

Adam had moved in. There wasn't much that could be different from one bedroom to the next anyway. There was the bed and the dresser. Perhaps a wardrobe and a desk. A small night table for a lamp or reading material. Closets for clothes, both washed and needing laundry.

Charles made his way to the bed and pulled back the covers. He could already see Adam stirring a bit as he put his arm around him, letting him know that Charles was there. The bed would be warm and the sheets comforting as their weight pressed onto him. He'd be relaxing and falling asleep in no time.

He slipped into the bed and pulled the covers over him. The bed wasn't as warm as he expected. He didn't feel the mattress gently push him towards where he expected Adam to be. It just held him where he was. He reached over, but no one was there.

Charles felt around a bit to make sure he hadn't missed anything, as if Adam was a small animal that could get lost in a bed made for people. He felt himself begin to sweat and turn cold as he realized Adam wasn't there and he didn't know where he might be. The bed shivered with his heartbeat, rocking slightly back and forth, reinforcing the thudding in his ears.

He threw back the covers and slid out of bed, catching himself before he fell forward onto the floor. He made his way through the dark to the door and switched on the light.

The air conditioner was the only thing present, and Charles could only hear it. The bed was hardly made. The sheets were pulled up in Adam's way of straightening them when he wasn't expecting company.

"Why make the bed when I'm just going to undo it in a few hours anyway?" Adam would say. He wasn't trying to keep his room clean and uncluttered to impress people he brought over—he had a family already. Adam seemed to spend a lot more time and effort

making himself pretty instead of his room, but Charles didn't mind too much. He was in love with Adam, not Adam's room.

Dora thought that Adam was here, so there was no use in contacting her. Barbara was still missing and presumed dead. There was no one left except himself and Adam, and Adam was the problem.

This was Adam's room. If Adam wasn't here to tell him where he was, then perhaps there was something he left behind that would point in the right direction. If he was in a hurry, he might have left something unstoppered in the bathroom, or forgotten to take something with him that he usually took.

Charles slowly looked around the room.

A drawer might not be pushed all the way in. A sock might be hanging out. The closet might be open.

There.

On the dresser was the thing Charles was looking for. The necklace with a rocket on it. Adam always wore it, but for some reason he didn't this time. Everything else looked like Adam hadn't left in a hurry. If he didn't forget anything else, then he probably didn't forget the necklace, which meant he had purposefully left it behind.

Why would Adam want to hide his cardinality? Charles couldn't think of anywhere in the city someone's cardinality would be a problem. Certain doors opened or closed based on it, but those were based on having the right cardinality, not having the wrong one. Not having a cardinality wasn't going to be a benefit.

Adam wasn't quite used to having a full family yet, Charles knew. He was still used to having his own private space where he could be himself, think his own thoughts, and

not have to worry about anyone else. Perhaps he had gone some place where he could be solitary and deal with losing Barbara without having to worry about dealing with him.

He started looking through drawers to see what Adam might have thrown in them: small trinkets, tokens, tickets. Anything that could point to where he went frequently and might be most comfortable. One drawer had nothing but this kind of junk. He took it out of the dresser and sat down on the bed with it.

He started picking out various pieces, laying them on the bed grouped by location, seeing if a pattern emerged. There were a lot of subway tickets from the office, most with fading ink now that the subway ticket system could work with their handheld computers.

There were a few tokens for a pachinko parlor that needed to be turned in for prizes. That particular one was just around the corner from the apartment. Token redemption was an art in itself, akin to playing the stock market. You never knew when a good set of prizes would be introduced, but you didn't want to wait so long that the parlor went out of business and you were stuck with worthless tokens. Or perhaps something that wasn't exactly what you wanted, but good enough, was discontinued while you waited for just the right item that never seemed to come along. Winning the tokens was the easy part.

At the bottom of the drawer, under all of the tokens and tickets and trinkets, was a small, paper book. Strange, Charles thought. He didn't remember Adam having a notebook. No one did these days. Such things were frowned on, even if they weren't illegal. Writing on paper withheld that information from the computer system, which meant the department didn't have it to rule the writer out as a suspect when trying to reconstruct narratives surrounding a crime. It was an ancient and venerable detective who had said the whatever remained after eliminating the inconsistent had to be consistent, even if it didn't seem possible.

He flipped it from the end, as he tended to do when reading old paper books and magazines. Most of the book was empty, but about a third of the way from the front, he came across the first page with something on it. He read it.

It was a journal entry written that day by Adam. He had been keeping a journal about something he was doing that no one else knew anything about. There was mention of a father as well as Charles. Something about needing to see Eve. Hiding. Deception. Stuff that had no place in the family. At least Adam had been smart enough to keep it in the journal instead of telling everyone. But still, Charles felt somehow cheated that Adam wouldn't share these things.

A single father. He had missed that on the first reading. But Adam had two fathers, just as he should for someone who grew up in the city as he had. Charles had met them and the mothers while the family was dating Adam. They didn't interact much, but that was expected of in-laws.

And Eve. That was another strange one. Adam sneaking out to have sex when he had Charles and Barbara and Dora with whom he could explore that side of him. Charles chuckled to himself. Here was Adam with three more experienced people than he, and he thinks he has to go to someone else to learn.

He knew an Eve down the hall and around the corner. She had brought Barbara over during one of her breakdowns during her early days in the family. The department job was stressful and took some getting used to. Barbara had grown quite a bit in the years since. He wondered if it might be the same Eve. He could picture her being a dominatrix. Tall leather boots with heels. Whips. He wasn't sure what else she might wear, but those are the things he thought of when thinking "dominatrix."

A few minutes later, Charles was dressed and knocking on Eve's door. He hadn't noticed before that her apartment number was almost the same as theirs. It ended in a three. Theirs ended in an eight. No wonder Barbara had gotten confused. In the dim light of the hall and her distressed state, she probably thought the three was an eight. It was even dropped down a bit from the baseline, so it could look like their eight when it was upside down.

The door opened and Eve looked out. He jerked back and immediately knew that his lower back was going to be hurting in the morning. He hadn't heard the usual sound of locks being turned.

She wasn't wearing boots or holding a whip. She had a short dress on and stockings, as if she were in the middle of getting ready to go out. Not quite the image of a dominatrix, he thought.

She opened the door wide and stepped back, giving Charles plenty of room to enter.

He did.

She shut the door behind him.

"It's been a while since I've seen you," she said. "How's Barbara?"

"She's not dead," Charles said, "but we're not sure where she is."

"Did she have a breakdown and wander off somewhere?"

"No." He turned and looked at her. "Was Adam over here earlier?"

"Adam?"

"The youngest member of our family," he said.

"Oh." She slapped her forehead as if she suddenly remembered. "Him!"

She motioned for him to sit down, but he didn't want to. He wanted to find out where Adam was.

“You look like you want to talk, but don’t want to stay. Which is it?”

“I need to know where Adam is. He’s not at home and he didn’t tell us where he was going.”

“I don’t know where he is. He stopped by briefly earlier today to ask me where some shops were so he could pick up a present for your anniversary.” She looked at him. “You haven’t forgotten about it, have you?”

“No, of course not. Which ones did you tell him about?”

“Now, if I told you, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise, would it?”

Charles had seen this before. You couldn’t work for the department long before running into people who would do anything except tell you what you needed to know. Usually, they ended up telling you everything except what you needed, dancing around it, leaving a big, blank spot in whatever narrative they were building for you.

Everything Eve said pointed to Adam not going near the edge of the city. Nothing about leaving. Nothing about visiting parents. Everything she said pushed Adam into the center of the city.

This had to be the Eve that Adam wrote about.

“Thanks,” Charles said abruptly, cutting Eve off. “I think you’ve answered my questions.”

“Glad I could be of help,” she said. “Let me know if there’s anything else you might need.”

He could hear her locking the door behind him as he turned and walked down the hall.

Even with the door to the apartment building made of steel and locked, everyone still barricaded themselves behind solid wooden doors. It wasn’t everyone out there they were

afraid of. It was their neighbors. They knew that they were better than this place with its dangling lights and peeling wall paper. Someday, Charles thought, they'd leave.

The stairs creaked on the way down. Fortunately, the elevator had waited until after they had moved in to stop working. The only furniture they had had to move was whatever Adam brought with him when he moved in a couple years prior. The stairs had never fully recovered. Charles wasn't sure how they'd move out. He imagined them chucking stuff over the side of the stairs and hoping it landed on some mattresses below.

Charles didn't like broken elevators. He imagined the doors opening and nothing being there. He could see himself helping someone move, walking backwards while carrying a desk and dropping down the shaft. At least he wouldn't hear the scream if he fell from far enough up.

He opened the door to the outside world that was the prim and proper city and made sure no one was waiting to get in. They were like cats, always wanting to get in where they weren't supposed to. You had to push them away and squeeze through the door before they could get past you. He wasn't sure what they thought was better inside. It always seemed to be like this before the garbage crew came through.

Dora's telephone didn't seem to be responding. He tried calling to bring her up to speed concerning Adam, but kept getting bumped to voice mail. He didn't like leaving messages, especially when any response would be too late. If he needed to know something in an hour or two, he'd call in an hour or two. He needed to talk to her now. He'd keep trying as he made his way to the office.

The air had the heavy chill of early morning right before sunrise. The city was its quietest at this time, though an outsider wouldn't know it. Living here for so many years made its rhythms part of him. Unconsciously, he knew where to step to avoid the last

remaining puddles from the evening's storm and the delivery cart that came out of the alley. It wasn't a look or stare or fashion or accent that gave away a visitor. It was their dissonance. They were a statue standing still in a maelstrom of civilization, instantly recognizable.

The office was dark when Charles got there. He kept the light off and closed the office door. Sometimes sitting in the dark helped him concentrate, and right now, his family needed all the concentration he could muster.

Dora answered her phone, finally. Charles explained what he had discovered about Adam.

"I know," she said. "He's probably going to visit his father out in the wilds."

"You know?"

"I've known his father for years."

"But we met his parents," Charles said, confused. "All four of them."

"No," Dora said. "That's a cover. Adam doesn't know I know. I'm still trying to figure out why he wasn't being honest with us."

"How long have you known?"

"For years." Dora paused a bit. "Since I worked with his father."

"When were you going to tell us?" Charles was wondering why Dora had withheld this from them. They were professionals. They could keep secrets. Obviously, that ability extended to keeping them from each other.

"When I needed to," Dora said. She sounded a bit tired. "I didn't like it, but I was trying to keep the drama down."

"Hiding stuff from us isn't a good way to do that," Charles said, trying to be reasonable, but still not sure what to do. They needed to find Barbara. This was a distraction that they would have to deal with later. He told Dora as much.

“When we finish here, we’ll all have some talking to do,” she said. “I know you’ve been doing a few things behind our back as well. That’s why you’ve been late to the office. Barbara was stressing about that earlier.”

“Fine,” Charles said. He didn’t want to get into this here and now. “We have other stuff to do right now. Let’s do it.” He wanted to end this conversation as quickly as he could. He wasn’t going to bring any of it up again. He didn’t want them digging into his clandestine visits into the VR with Jared. That was part of the deal he had made with whatever committee he was working with there.

“You’re at the office,” Dora said. “Go ahead and suit up and meet me in the VR. We have some work to do. I know where Barbara is.”

“You do?” Suddenly, their whole argument was set aside. If they were this close to getting Barbara back, then he’d do whatever Dora asked.

“She’s at the Home. I’ll explain after you’re in the VR.”

He closed the phone and sat staring into the darkness for a bit. There was going to be some shouting later at home when Adam and Dora got back and he was there.

But she had found Barbara!

He stripped down to his underwear. The office was a bit cold without most of his clothes on. His skin prickled as goosebumps raised the hairs on his arms. He hurriedly took his VR suit out of its drawer and put it on. Its warmth spread across him as it activated. The darkness of the office made the transition into the VR much less jarring than when he went to meet with the committee.

Hopefully this meeting wouldn’t be as stressful. At the back of his mind though, he thought of the implications of Adam having only one father.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUSE FALLS

Barbara felt her arms floating as they tore through the roots. She could see them, but everything was fading. Her arms hung at her side and gravity was at her back as she stood firm on the ground and pulled on the roots.

But that was fading. The roots still tore and stuff still spilled out as they retracted and healed, but she couldn't feel the slipperiness against her fingers. Nothing fell on her even as it passed through.

A face floated in front of her and above her, depending on which frame of reference she chose to pay attention to. The first twinges of nausea let her know that she needed to pick one and stay with it. Whatever was pressing against her back seemed stronger than the ground that was beneath her feet.

"Can you hear us?"

The voice was male, someone she didn't recognize.

"What happened?" she asked.

"What's your name?"

"Who are you?" she asked, not quite comprehending what he was saying.

"What's your name?"

"Barbara," she said, realizing that the same question would be repeated until she answered.

"How old are you?"

One question replaced by another.

"I'm thirty six," she said, not knowing why that mattered. "What happened?"

Dora's face floated into view.

"Dora? Your voice is so deep. I didn't recognize you. Is something wrong with my hearing?"

Dora laughed.

It was pitched too high to be the voice she had heard before.

"Is there someone else here?" Barbara asked.

"The diener showed me in and we found you," Dora said. "He was wanting to make sure you were okay."

"Why wouldn't I be? All you did was wake me up from some kind of VR experience."

"Is that what it felt like?" Dora asked. "We integrated your VR self with your real self."

"Which one am I?"

"You're the real one. The one that has a heart and a head and blood rushing around between the two." Dora took Barbara's hand in her own and held it lightly. "You're the one I cooked dinner for before you took a bath."

"You've been in a coma, so we took the memories from the VR you and integrated them into your mind in place of the blank time."

"How is that possible? That kind of technology doesn't even exist."

"It's been around for a while." Dora's hands became firm. "It's still experimental, but it was the only way to make sure you could help us figure out what was going on."

"You used an experimental procedure to make changes to my mind?"

Barbara felt her pulse quicken as she looked back and forth between the man, whoever he was, and Dora. This didn't seem like the same Dora who had cooked dinner and caressed her shoulders, calming her at the end of a long day in the office.

“You know how fragile my mind is right now,” she said. She still hadn’t read the memes she had picked up on the way home. If she had, she’d be reciting them now, calming herself in the reassuring monotony that created familiarity. “Why would you risk turning me into a comatose body with no hope of recovery just so you can solve some crime?”

Dora’s touch wasn’t reassuring any longer. Her hand felt foreign. Barbara tried to pull back, but Dora held on.

“Who’s that?” Barbara asked, pointing at the man who was coming into focus. The last vestiges of the VR slipped away and she was completely lying on a gurney in a room with Dora and a tall, thin man.

“That would be the diener,” Dora said. “He’s the one I mentioned who helped me find you.”

Barbara looked at him.

“Is he the one who asked me for my name?”

“He is.”

“What do you remember doing in the VR?” he asked.

Definitely the same voice that had asked for her name. Her hearing had been good the whole time. She shook her head a bit, as if trying to rattle things around so the memories would pop up.

She related to them what had happened in the VR. Some of the details were fading, like a bad dream that nagged at the mind but slipped away when she thought about it.

“Do you remember the faces of the people who tried to stop you from entering the roots?” the diener asked.

“Not really,” Barbara said, “but I might be able to recognize them, assuming the computer was showing me the face of a real person.”

“We’ve had several people wake up on their own,” he said. “They’ve all had the same nightmares, similar to what you’ve been describing. Darkness. Cold. Then sudden light, a feeling of joy, and they wake up.

“We’ve also had a few slip away and die on us, even with all of the equipment hooked up to them.”

He waved at the tubes and boxes that she noticed for the first time. Monitors and drug inducers, IV drips and a catheter, all connected to her, keeping her body in an equilibrium state, damping her joy at being alive and her anger at Dora for what she had done. The thoughts stayed with her, but her emotions were largely gone. She’d only be able to manage brief bouts of anger if she tried hard enough.

Barbara remembered that Adam was probably somewhere in the VR.

“Do you know where Adam is?” she asked.

“Charles is looking for him,” Dora said. “He probably went to his father’s home outside the city.”

“Outside the city? But we had dinner with his parents before accepting him into the family”

“They were a cover, dear,” Dora said. “I didn’t want to blow that cover while figuring out why he was wanting to join our family.”

Another deceit. Why would Dora allow them to accept someone who wasn’t who they were? The Adam she had met and fallen in love with and accepted into the family was young and vibrant, cute and innocent. A little naïve, perhaps, but familiar with and at home in the city. He hadn’t grown up outside.

“Where’s the Adam I know?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” Dora said. “He’s still Adam. He’s young and idealistic. He means well, even if that idealism makes him a pawn for the old and cynical like me and his father.”

She smiled kindly at Barbara.

“Those who mean well are always looking for a way to be kind and show mercy. They are Fish, deep down, and always being controlled by the Sword and Rocket. Those of the Cross just make them happy by encouraging silent resistance that never makes itself evident to anyone else.”

“Whichever Adam we have is in the VR somewhere,” Barbara said. Dora might think she was managing everything, but these distractions weren’t going to help them get done what she had agreed to do in the VR.

“We need to finish disconnecting whatever it is the roots correspond to,” she said. “Adam’s supposed to be in those roots, so if we can somehow get in touch with him, he might be able to help us figure that out.”

“Charles should be in the VR now,” Dora said.

She looked at the diener. “Would you be able to get him in touch with Adam?”

“We should be able to,” the diener said. “If you can get us in touch with Adam’s father, assuming that’s where Adam went, we can coordinate efforts.”

“What would Adam’s father know about the VR?” Barbara asked.

“He helped design it,” Dora said.

Barbara looked back and forth between them. The diener turned to a console while Dora began disconnecting cables.

“Meanwhile,” she said, “we need to get you out of this gurney so you can help us find whatever it is here that we need.”

Barbara tensed as Dora pulled the catheter out, but it didn't hurt. She felt a couple cooling drops on her thigh. She shook her leg and they dropped down the side onto the sheet. The IV needles did hurt a bit, but the sting quickly left.

Her legs felt steady. She had only been on the bed for a few hours, but the invasion of her head in the tub and then again to do the integration had left her unsure of herself. The body was hers, but at the same time, it didn't feel completely so. Probably a side effect of the integration process.

She tried to take a step. Her foot hung limply as she lifted her leg and caught it on the floor when she tried to swing it forward, almost throwing her. She caught herself on the gurney and clung to Dora's arm.

"You're still recovering," Dora said. "I think we'll keep the drug inducer on you a while longer."

She reached for the small, rectangular device and attached it to Barbara's arm with an elastic band.

"That'll keep you stable for a while."

Barbara didn't miss the tone that warned her to keep her emotions in check. Dora had a mission here and Barbara was part of it. Messing up would mean risking the family.

"We have Charles and Adam's father on line," the diener said. "Do you want me to patch Charles through to him?"

"Yes," Dora said. "That should be the easiest way for Charles to contact Adam."

Barbara couldn't hear anything other than the diener's side of the conversation, but she saw him roll his eyes a few times. It sounded as if Charles was getting off task and trying to figure out where Adam's father figured into things. She wished she knew.

The diener explained the situation to Dora. Adam was at his father's and in the VR, but the link had been severed a short time before and he was having trouble tracing it. He could get Charles close to where Adam had been and hope for the best. If nothing else, Charles would be able to tell if they had any effect in the VR near the disturbance.

"Can he see the tree?" Barbara asked.

"Yes," the diener said. "It's distant and he can't make out much detail, but it's large enough that he can see it from where he is. Adam's father can't see it on his systems though, which makes us think it's part of the rogue system that we're trying to break."

"We're going to start by disconnecting everyone in this ward," Dora said. "We'll leave the medical equipment alone so they have time to adjust to waking up without going into shock."

Barbara looked around and saw a dozen or so gurneys like hers.

"How many are there?" she asked.

"Hundreds of rooms like this," the diener said. "We were able to tag a few in the VR so you'd find them, but we didn't do it often because we didn't want to get caught."

"Those were the triangles I saw?"

"Yes," he said. "It was a shape that was simple but wouldn't be confused for a Cardinality. We wanted something that would catch your curiosity. We needed your department's help."

He pointed at her and Dora.

"We got it."

"Where are the wires we need to disconnect?" she asked.

"I think they're going to be in a wiring closet of some kind in the room." He pointed at a few cabinet doors that were scattered around. "Like those."

“What are we looking for?”

“Anything that looks like computer cabling. The medical devices can function long enough without a network connection, so just pull anything that looks like it might be able to pass information.

“The implants can’t be influenced from too far a distance, so whatever is interacting with them is close by.”

They went around opening cabinets and looking for cables. All she could see were medical supplies. Bandages, alcohol, swabs, bottles of medication, syringes. Archaic stuff that should have been made obsolete by technology.

“Nothing’s here,” Dora said. “Just stuff that no one needs.”

Barbara opened one of the doors she had already looked behind. She looked closely at the edges of the cabinet, looking for cracks or anything else that might indicate a second door.

Nothing.

She took everything out and felt against the back. It seemed to give a bit when she pressed on it, so she pushed as much as she could. It moved slightly. Pushing it down caused it to slide downward, revealing a mass of wiring. The shelves stayed in place, making it difficult to get good leverage, but from what she could see, these weren’t simple power cables. They were too small.

“I think I found it,” she said.

Dora and the diener came over to look.

He told Charles to watch the tree closely as he reached in and cut through the cables. No sparks. No flashing. Nothing happened. The cables simply fell away as if they had been holding up something below the opening. Their glass centers were dark and blind.

“Charles says that the tree shook a bit, but he’s too far away to see if the roots did anything,” the diener said.

They cut through all the cables they could find in the other cabinets with the same results. As each bunch of cables was cut, the tree shook.

“I think we know what we need to do,” he said. “Thanks to your family’s help and your department, we were able to establish the link we needed.”

He bowed slightly to them.

“Our people can handle the rest of the Home.”

“Who are your people?” Barbara asked. He had obliquely mentioned his group several times, as if it was obvious who was trying to destroy whatever had brought her here.

“I can’t say,” he said.

“It’s a secretive society,” Dora said. “I’ll tell you what I know about it on the way out.”

Dora took Barbara’s hand and pulled her towards the door. The diener watched, as if waiting for them to leave so he could finish whatever he needed to do.

In the corridor, they passed several people who ignored them. Barbara quickly lost track of where they had gone. The corridors seemed to form a maze designed to trap anyone not familiar with them. Zombies would never escape if they hadn’t walked in on their own.

She laughed to herself.

“The room we can use to leave is just around the corner,” Dora said.

A man came stumbling down the hall as if drunk, bouncing off the walls and dragging his feet on the carpet.

Dora stopped and pushed back on Barbara, holding her behind, protecting her. Perhaps she was still useful. She still had a place in the family. Otherwise, Dora might have encouraged her to go forward and find out what was wrong. She was trying to be a Fish.

The man came up to them.

“Where am I?” he asked. “I don’t remember coming here.”

“You’re in St. Messien’s Home,” Dora said.

“You’re Lawrence, the mortuary manager,” Barbara said, reading the name tag on his chest.

“I don’t know anything about running a mortuary,” he said. His eyes were wide open and darting around, as if looking for some way to escape.

“Come with us,” Dora said. “We’re leaving. We can take you with us.”

They turned the corner and ducked into one of the side rooms as another confused person came up behind them. No one tried to enter after them. They could hear the person bumping their way down the hall away from them.

Dora let out her breath. Barbara hadn’t even noticed Dora’s nervousness until now. She was always the quiet, calming one in the family. As much as she professed to be a Rocket, she could act as a Fish for the family.

“Through here,” Dora said, opening a cabinet door near the floor. “We’ll need to crawl a short way, but then we can stand and go back through the tunnels the way I came in. It’s safe.”

She related how she and Sous had managed to find a way into the Home without triggering security.

“It probably won’t matter now, but at least this way we don’t have to deal with anyone else like him.” She pointed at Lawrence.

They went through tunnels that Barbara had never seen before, but that Dora assured them she had come through to the Home. She seemed to know where she was going, and despite their conversation when she had been coming out of the VR, Barbara still trusted her, even if she didn't much like her at the moment.

They walked through the dripping tunnels and entered a large, circular room. Dora turned her flashlight around so they could see it. As it passed over the drawings on the wall, Lawrence stopped dead and gasped.

"It's backwards!" he said. "It should be the other order."

"I know," Dora said. "I'm not sure which group did this. I was planning on bringing Adam down sometime to see it."

"What's going to happen to Adam?" Barbara asked. She assumed his father would bring him out of the VR now that the family was finished with the business at the Home.

"I'm leaving that to his father," Dora said, confirming Barbara's thoughts.

"This was done by the trinitarians," Lawrence said. "They're the group that's trying to overthrow the Muses."

"No such group exists," Dora said. "If they did, the department would know about them."

Barbara remembered the triangles.

"Do they have anything to do with triangles?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I've already said too much. Seeing this place surprised me."

"Don't worry," Dora said.

Barbara was wanting to know more, but Dora kept talking before she could say anything. Instead, she crouched a bit and tried to hide in the shadows. In a room like this,

a single, strong source of light threw odd shadows that exaggerated everything, making it difficult to be unnoticeable.

“We’re with the department. It’s our business to help people and maintain public safety.”

Lawrence was down another tunnel before Barbara could reach out and grab him. She noticed that Dora had been left empty handed as well.

“Well, that’s one less person we need to worry about for now,” Dora said. “Come on, let’s go home. It’s been a long day.”

Barbara took the hand that Dora offered and stood up. Charles would be home in a few hours and the three of them needed to talk.

She hoped Adam wouldn’t be there. She remembered the Adam she had last seen the day before. The Adam she loved. Where he was, she didn’t know, but there was an Adam somewhere outside the city that would be coming back with a key to their apartment. A stranger whom she didn’t know.

“Why didn’t you tell us about Adam?” she asked.

“Because I didn’t want to worry you,” Dora said.

CHAPTER XX

SUMMARY

This thesis consists of a critical introduction and a science fiction, slipstream novel comprising 18 chapters and approximately 200 pages of original fiction. The critical introduction analyzes the creation of the novel and its influences, examining the structure of the novel as well as the larger setting that was created as part of the process of writing the novel. Finally, the introduction looks at the characterizations in the novel to demonstrate that yes, a science fiction novel can fulfill the classic needs of a novel as outlined by Virginia Woolf by way of Ursula Le Guinn.

The novel fulfills the traditional needs of a murder mystery but hijacks the structure to examine a polyamorous relationship of four adults as they confront difficulties that could tear their relationship apart. The resulting narrative treats the family as a single character in a novel fashion.

I believe the novel demonstrates an understanding of narrative techniques and traditions in creative writing.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1986. New York: Random House-Anchor, 1998.
- Bourgogne, Elisabeth. Liner Notes. *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Music by Olivier Messiaen. Ensemble Walter Boeykens. Audio compact disc. Harmonia Mundi, 1990.
- Brin, David. *Kiln People*. New York: Tor, 2002.
- Broderick, Damien. *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Coover, Robert. "The Magic Poker." *Pricksongs & Descants: Fictions*. New York: Grove P, 1969. 20–45.
- Delany, Samuel R. "Empire Star." *Distant Stars*. Toronto: Bantam, 1981. Reprinted from *Empire Star*, N.P.: Ace, 1966.
- . *Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Elizabethtown, NY: Dragon P, 1977.
- . *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*. Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1994.
- Disch, Thomas M. *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*. New York: The Free Press, 1998.

- Graham, Paul. *Hackers and Painters: Big Ideas from the Computer Age*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2004.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed. Susan Wood. Rev. Ed. Ursula K. Le Guin. N.P.: HarperCollins, 1992. 97–117.
- Lutz, John. "In the Beginning is the End." *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America*. Ed. Sue Grafton, Jan Burke, and Barry Zeman. 2nd ed. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2001. 173–179.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- Miller, Walter M. Jr. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. 1959. New York: Bantam, 1976.
- Sterling, Bruce. "Slipstream." *Science Fiction Eye*. 1.5 (1989): 77–80.
- Watanabe, Takashi, dir. *Boogiepop Phantom*. TV Tokyo, 2000. DVD Box Set. Right Stuff International, 2002.
- Whitworth, Brian. "The Physical World as a Virtual Reality." Electronic pre-print. URL <<http://arxiv.org/abs/0801.0337v2>> 5 Jan 2008.
- Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Trans. Mirra Ginsburg. New York: Avon, 1972.

Works Consulted

- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*." Trans. Anthony Bonner. *Ficciones*. Ed. Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove P, 1962. 45–55.

Delany, Samuel R. *Longer Views: Extended Essays*. Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1996.

---. *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary*. Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1999.

Napier, Susan J. *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Stryker, Susan. *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001.

Takahata, Isao, dir. *Grave of the Fireflies*. Shinchosa, 1988. DVD. Central Park Media, 1998.

Thompson, Stith. *The Folktale*. 1946. Berkeley: U of California P, 1977.

VITA

James Smith received a Bachelor of Science in the double majors of mathematics and physics from Texas A&M University in 2000 and a Master of Arts in english from Texas A&M University in 2008. Smith is currently the Digital Humanities Lead Developer for the University's College of Liberal Arts Digital Humanities Program. His permanent mailing address is 3520 Oakside Dr, Bryan, TX 77802.